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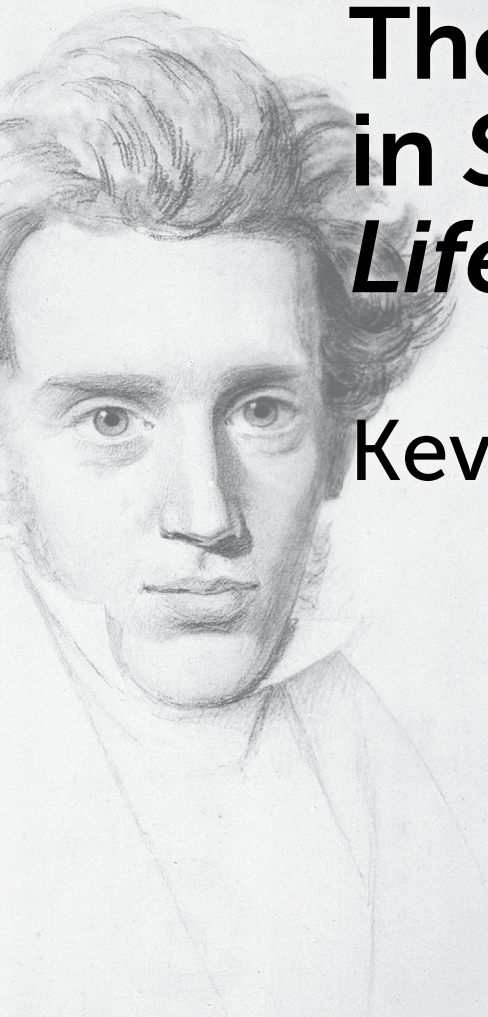
The Philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard

The Diarist in *Stages on Life's Way*



Kevin Hoffman

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Cambridge Elements

Elements in the Philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard
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THE DIARIST IN *STAGES ON LIFE'S WAY*

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The Diarist in *Stages on Life's Way*

Elements in the Philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard

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Abstract: Kierkegaard's *Stages on Life's Way* belongs to what by 1845 can be understood as the romantic tradition, itself containing members related by both blood and adoption to those in the Christian tradition. By far the greatest portion of this Element is devoted to the portrait of an ethically enervated, anonymous troubadour turned troglodyte whose peculiar diary is accidentally found locked in a box with the key inside at the bottom of a pond. To bring up and out what animates this central character, the initial portions of stages on the despairing ambivalence of a group of tipsy bachelors and the pedantic moralizing of an anonymous husband unfold the interpersonal ideals at play in pursuit of a meaningful life all told. Following suit, the diary recounts a troubled love affair, which is, as Kierkegaard says elsewhere, "always a usable theme in relation to what it means to exist."

Keywords: Kierkegaard, romanticism, aesthetic, love, marriage

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> All men of good disposition feel, with increasing cultivation, that they have a double part to play in the world—a real one and an ideal one; and this feeling must be viewed as the ground of every noble impulse. We learn only too clearly the real part assigned to us; with respect to the second, we seldom come to a clear understanding about it. Let a person seek his higher purpose on earth or in heaven, in the present or the future, he yet remains on this account exposed to an eternal wavering, to an influence from without which ever disturbs him, until he once and for all makes a resolution to declare that what is right is what is suitable to himself.
>
> —Goethe, *Autobiography*, XI

Preliminaries

Understanding Kierkegaard as a religious critic of Christendom has been well traversed. This prophetic role is particularly evident in the so-called second authorship that begins after 1846 and culminates in the public attack occasioned by Bishop Mynster and his successor Hans Lassen Martensen. But in comparison to his status as a *persona non grata* among cultured believers, less charted are the ways Kierkegaard is a poetic pariah among Romantics. Naturally, this strain of the authorship is more evident in the so-called aesthetic works that predominate leading up to *The Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and its famous "Glance at Danish Literature." There we learn *Stages on Life's Way* is a literary culmination of sorts wherein the "love affair" leitmotif ("always a usable theme in relation to what it means to exist") that winds through *Either/Or*, *Fear and Trembling*, and *Repetition* emerges front and center and comes to illustrate the intricacies of spiritual life all told (Kierkegaard, 1992: I, 265). Summarily put, *Stages* is a philosophically comprehensive and artistically nuanced contribution to the decidedly romantic preoccupation with *meaning* seeping everywhere from the headwaters of modernity. Virtually all at once, and with rather earnest irony, perhaps no single literary production so stunningly incorporates and addresses the aesthetic, moral, and religious questions of the new century. As such, it belongs to an era of reconstruction amidst the disenchanting fallout of the *Aufklärung*.

The elemental romanticism of the authorship does not recede after the publication of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. It bubbles forth even from within the jarringly messianic *Practice in Christianity*, the very work that all but announces Kierkegaard's ensuing attack on official piety. There Anti-climacus describes the secret spiritual sufferings of Christ "that were inseparable from his life in unrecognizability from the time he appeared until the very last" and were "greater than all physical tortures combined." The source of this suffering is a profound, incommunicable,

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inner collision: "out of love for another person to have to conceal an inwardness and seem to be other than one is." If this were not enough to remind us of the diarist at the heart of *Stages*, this new pseudonym pauses to make an extended autobiographical comment.

> I may at times betray such an acquaintance with concealed inwardness, the suffering of real self-denial, that someone could perhaps have the notion that I, even though an ordinary human being, nevertheless am such a person, one of those rare noble human beings. Far from it. In a strange manner and not exactly on account of my virtues but rather on account of my sins, I have purely formally become aware of the secrets of existence and the secretiveness of existence in a way in which these and this presumably do not exist for many people. I do not pride myself on this, for it is not on account of my virtues. But I make an honest effort to use this knowledge to illuminate what is humanely true and what is humanly the true good. And this I use in turn to prompt, if possible, an awareness of the holy—about which I always add that no human being can comprehend this, and that in regard to this the beginning and ending is worship (Kierkegaard, 1991: 136–9).

This intertextual confession invites us to take seriously the way in which Kierkegaard's understanding of Jesus of Nazareth cannot be fully understood apart from the interpersonal agonies of a genuine love affair, so fraught with incommunicable affinities. Arguably, the religious and romantic dimensions of the authorship form a more organic unity than the coherence commonly attributed to the external publication of the "edifying discourses" that run parallel to the pseudonymous works. Not only does Kierkegaard's mixed response to romanticism bear the same stamp as his ambivalent attitude toward his fellow Lutherans, but the very *religious romanticism* that distinguishes him from his poetic peers is itself the major source of his discontent with cultured Christianity. While each of Kierkegaard's works takes up key components of the "life-view" he especially sought to invoke throughout his writings, more than any other figure within the corpus, the diarist from *Stages on Life's Way* tells something like a whole story (Kierkegaard, 1990: 76).

1 The Aesthetic Background

As an author who would eventually join the esteemed ranks of international literati, Kierkegaard assumed the implicit aim of "arts and letters" was to express some salient tenor of spiritual life as we intuitively experience and culturally shape it. Because Hegel's outlook on imaginative literature figured so prominently in the flowering of Denmark's golden age, his lectures on fine art are particularly helpful in describing the aesthetic tradition to

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which Kierkegaard's authorship belongs, and from which the diarist of *Stages on Life's Way* specifically emerges. More generally, the lectures help articulate how "the constructs of the imagination tell us things about human life we don't get in any other way" (Frye, 1964: 125).

According to its inner teleology, Hegel likens the role of artistic production in making *Geist* appear in concrete, embodied form to the proliferation of eyes, those very organs through which the soul recognizes itself "at every point." And "it is not only the bodily form, the look of the eyes, the countenance, and posture, but also actions and events, speech and tones of voice, and the series of their course through all conditions of appearance that art has everywhere to make into an eye, in which the free soul is revealed in its inner infinity" (Hegel, 1975: I, 153–4). Nor is this vision a matter of "intellectual reflection alone," a kind of detached, cognitive appraisal of measure and order. Rather, clearly prompted by the *Strum and Drang* movement, "the whole human heart with everything whereby it is moved in its innermost being, everything which is powerful in it – every feeling and passion, every deeper interest in the soul – this concrete life forms the living stuff of art, and the Ideal is its representation and expression" (Hegel, 1975: I, 176).

This expressive proliferation of artistic insight is fitting since the truth, and hence beauty of spiritual existence, according to *its* inner teleology in real life, does in fact "bestir and realize itself" by "surrendering to a world which, instead of displaying in itself the ideal free correspondence of the Concept with its reality, manifests rather an existence which just is not what it ought to be" (Hegel, 1975: I, 178). By implication, though perfect bliss and repose may be supreme attributes of beauty manifest as a statuary object, the "intensity and depth of subjectivity come all the more to light, the more endlessly and tremendously it is divided against itself, and the more lacerating are the contradictions in which it still has to remain firm in itself. In this development alone is preserved the might of the Idea and the Ideal, for might consists only in maintaining oneself within the negative of oneself" (Ibid). Significant as it is for both the most divine as well as most human subjects, this "Golgotha of the spirit" is a drama that continues to play itself out in the otherwise ordinary heroism of "determinate characters and their momentary circumstances and situations" (Hegel, 1975: I, 176).

When Hegel turns from this veritable onto-theology of aesthetic experience to the history of art, he is naturally at pains to describe an inclusive and moving account of the "word made flesh" in every representative sculpture and portico, every truly expressive melody, verse, brush stroke, and

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theatrical act. But it is certainly clear he thinks the "Word" was there from the beginning. According to the ensuing story, "symbolic art *seeks* that perfect unity of inner meaning and external shape which classical art *finds* in the presentation of substantial individuality to sensuous contemplation, and which romantic art *transcends* in its superior spirituality" (Hegel, 1975: I, 302). This schema allows Hegel to categorize the peculiarly homesick and melancholy quality of those expressive representations that give "unfettered play to the bold lines of the ugly" in contrast to the clean lines or tangible harmonies that provide an otherwise exalted, thoroughly available, "classical" image of perfection (Hegel, 1975: I, 527). Setting aside the purportedly subconscious, hieroglyphic art of the ancient near east, the crucial contrast Hegel draws is between those "romantic" works that poignantly explore the harrowing depths of despair and alienation in a world where divine things seem largely absent, and those (classical, Greek) works that confidently tackle a *eudaimonia* wherein health and wholeness and human salvation make their blessed appearance, as it were, right in our midst.

However, the distinction is messy. Schiller had drawn the contrast in perhaps a finer, more tenuous way by saying "what filled Homer's soul, as he had his divine swineherd entertain Ulysses, was a completely different feeling from what moved the soul of young Werther when he read this song following an evening in some irritating company. Our feeling for nature is like the sick person's feeling for health" (Schiller, 1993: 195). Presumably, this opposition between the "naïve and sentimental" is itself an indistinguishable product of the culture that divides humanity from a purely natural existence. But that only raises the perplexing question about what would prompt Homer to write his poem in the first place if he had indeed been so at home with himself. Arguably, Schiller's point is that the phenomenon of homesickness – *Weltschmerz*, *mal du siècle* – appears as a kind of inevitable possibility against the backdrop of original blessing. Historical periodization is a rather subordinate concern, since "this road taken by the modern poet is the same road humans in general must travel" (Schiller, 1993: 202).

For those keeping theological track, Hegel goes on to say that while the Ideal (*Geist*, *Logos*, Word) does take on human flesh in Greece, and does so with perfection, it only does so *artistically*, and not historically, in reality, as announced in the prologue to the Gospel of John (Hegel, 1975: I, 505). When *that* happens, when God actually becomes human, art takes a very different turn, and not one especially in keeping with Hegel's own taste. Eric Heller describes this particular tension within Hegel's account as "the painful dilemma of the Christian in love with Hellas" (Heller, 1965: 114). The actual turn, that is, was away from classical beauty toward real

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human flesh, toward deformity, decay, and death, and away from the flesh in its natural bloom of youth and strength. Ambivalently, Hegel does really seem to have understood the meaning of *kenosis*.

If we look to where this trajectory leads from a critic's point of view, and indeed turn to truly representative sculptures and porticos, to remarkably expressive melodies, verses, brush strokes, and theatrical acts, then Hegel's analysis would have especially come alive if he had had before him Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*, alas, published the very year of the philosophers' passing. The mere mention of this all-encompassing monument to grotesque sublimity – with the incongruous Quasimodo, beautiful Esmeralda, and her charmingly pathetic goat playing out the all-too-human drama – should evoke what by the middle of the nineteenth century is an ongoing literary legacy of misaligned lovers, broken heroes, and general festivity of fools. Hugo's masterpiece is itself an example of a *demoiselle* that flits along and draws us through the darkened world toward "the soft light of a sweet moral heaven," to quote one of Hegel's favored lines by Schiller. And it is from out of this "world-historical" tradition that the troubled central character of Kierkegaard's *Stages on Life's Way* emerges. The diarist who tells the tale of his broken engagement belongs to the cast of great romantic characters who express the human predicament in that grippingly earnest and sometimes outrageously pathetic way we have come to associate with a fully modern, cultural second birth.

As at other points where Hegel is not obtruding with artificial periodization, we can readily see ourselves, and the purpose of literature, in his sketch of the hero as one who, in venturing, collides with a world outside itself – with others, God, nature, or some established order. Out of such collisions beautiful souls contend with, struggle against, acknowledge, accept, and even celebrate the various causes, elemental values, or contingent thorns in the flesh that factor into that conflict and give birth to some third identity, vision, or new life. In so doing their stories articulate and thereby contribute to the overall depth, richness, and variety of the life of "the Spirit" (Hegel, 1975: I, 213–7). Giving rise to various agonies and ecstasies, the conflict may be "tragically unavoidable," and yet there are all kinds of unique, perplexing, and creative ways to handle it. The turbulence itself is romantic, and whether we want to insist on its being historically necessary or ultimately good, it is always, possibly, and perchance ennobling. The aesthetic goal, if there be such a telos, is to make sense of the suffering, indeed, to make something out of it, "as its own proper medium" (Hegel, 1975: I, 113). Put otherwise, the hero "is the poetic projection of man as he unavoidably faces the meaning or

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lack of meaning of life" (Brombert, 1969: 12). Whether in relation to a social group, to oneself, or to the supernatural, these dynamics present the moral chiaroscuros that comprise the spiritual life – a life beyond, wrested from, but nevertheless imbedded in our natural, immediate, mundane, prosaic, "unbeautiful" lives here and now.

Famously, the legacy of such romantic subjectivities varies considerably. It includes Chateaubraind's *René*, Byron's Childe Harold, and Lermontov's Pechorin, none of whom spring to mind as markedly Kierkegaardian. Much closer to the diarist would be Holderlin's *Hyperion* or George Sand's *Lelia*. Cognizant of the mood of such figures, Johannes Climacus compares and then immediately contrasts the tortured reflections of the diarist from *Stages* with Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* (Kierkegaard, 1992: I, 298). But what is striking about this literary tradition is the ubiquity and sheer urgency of the question about what makes up a *schöne Seele* (beautiful soul) and what might distinguish that person from an entirely thwarted or even run-of-the-mill *Herzensmench*. What *is* it that makes a person of great feeling and interiority into an individual who out of that particularity shines forth with a kind of unaccountable, steadfast goodness?

Hegel himself wavers on the matter. While he endorsed a romantic emphasis on the sentient, historical, and expressive features of human life that *Aufklärung* thinkers often eschewed, he was also profoundly allergic to ironic treatments of those public, institutional forms of life that are, he thought, the indispensable link between a truly integrated self-consciousness and objective reality (Taylor, 1975: 3 ff, Reid, 2014: 9 ff). Without such public forms of life, there could be no meaningful whole, which is certainly a specter raised by the fate of many romantic heroes, from young Werther to Stendhal's Julien Sorel. At a telling moment in the lectures, Hegel even suggests that under contemporary social conditions the scale and frequency of "beautiful individuality" invariably shrinks due to an increase in the (moral) rationality of (modern) familial, economic, and political institutions. At zero sum, there is nothing more to conquer except to *feel at home* as spouse and parent, breadwinner and patriot. Hence, we can "only marvel" at the "youthful" desire of Goethe and Schiller "to win back the lost independence of heroic figures." He cites Goetz von Berlichingen and the outlaw Karl Moor. Likewise, Hegel insinuates Don Quixote can only appear "ridiculous" given how our "legal order has been more completely developed in its prosaic form" (Hegel, 1975: I, 195–6). This last citation is fitting because *Stages on Life's Way* itself indicates how, given our well-fed, civilized times, the diarist is indeed

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quixotic, though not quite so mad as to think there might be more than one, even several such knights-errant in Denmark (Kierkegaard, 1988: 402). This statement is doubly ironic, for as we shall see, the diarist is and is earnestly *supposed to be* exceptional, and yet *in that way* a model for authentic selfhood. Hegel would likely say Kierkegaard has it reversed: "in the world of today the individual subject may of course act of himself in this or that matter, but still every individual, wherever he may twist or turn, belongs to an established social order and does not appear himself as the independent, total, and at the same time individual living embodiment of this society, but only as a restricted member of it" (Hegel, 1975: I, 194). In any event, the momentous interpretive question is whether, and how, the "inner infinity" of spiritual subjectivity can both cancel and preserve (*Aufhebung*) the finitude of bourgeois existence (or vice versa).

Arguably, it is not simply Hegel who wavers. The very vocabulary brought to bear when circling the peculiar *sine qua non* of romantic individuals – from the language of misfits, foundlings, and dark beauties, to the hyper-sensitive or hyper-ethical, the pathologically religious or sentimentally drained, the forlorn and homesick – itself evokes a set of norms, albeit from a fractured point of view. Common among these types is an "unresolved ambivalence" in which the "urge toward a more encompassing relationship with what is (or with those who are) outside the self runs into the counter impulse to explore the rich possibilities and rewards of spiritual aristocracy" (Garber, 1967: 325–8). The intuition half-articulated by this notion of spiritual aristocracy is the way in which the calm transparency and rational agency of "enlightened man," with his universal imperatives, prototypical choices, and social acceptability, do not lead us to a *person*, to that unique, irreducible, and perchance inexplicable individual who is the chief source and object of our care. Nor does the sort of normalized equality modern institutions are supposed to embody ever adequately express individual dignity. Nevertheless, resolving upon what is "suitable to oneself" is "exposed to an eternal wavering" (Goethe). If what our heroes find themselves facing is the subjectively felt meaning of life, or lack thereof, then for the romantic hero, this prospect is especially aggravated, dire, and even bottomless.

Beyond aesthetics narrowly construed, and to unpack this aggravated, dire, and even bottomless prospect, we can here venture a broad definition of romanticism as the variegated conviction that we arrive at meaning ahead of and around pure, disinterested, uninvolved, disenchanted, so-called objective accounts of the world. As particular inhabitants of that world, the meaning of human life unfolds before and despite the kind of socio-biological,

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economic accounts of agency that unduly circumscribe the powers of both reason and emotion. Typically, both the harder and the human sciences offer their findings by way of reduction. Because from an objective "scientific" point of view, the song of a nightingale does not mean anything, it cannot move us. Circumventing such reduction, romanticism offers by way of positive contribution a panoply of subterranean powers of perception that answer to the so-called subjective terms that resonate within the independent sense we otherwise have of truth, goodness, and beauty – so to speak – out there. William James referred to this as our *Binnenleben*:

> This dumb region of the heart in which we dwell alone with our willingnesses and unwillingnesses, our faiths and fears. As through the cracks and crannies of caverns these waters exude from the earth's bosom which then form the fountain-heads of springs, so in these crepuscular depths of personality the sources of all our outer deeds and decisions take their rise. Here is our deepest organ of communication with the nature of things; and compared with these concrete movements of our soul all abstract statements and scientific arguments—the veto, for example, which the strict positivist pronounces upon our faith—sound to us like mere chatterings of teeth (James, 1992: 502).

Philosophers have always recognized that accounts of an objective world require a subject who is at least minimally involved in and already connected to that world, a subject who at the very least desires to know, and who, by fundamental presupposition, is appropriately attuned and not entirely ignorant. However, for specific technical purposes, the epistemological asceticism of scientific methods sought to purify our understanding of extraneous material and interests. The romantics, of course, leaned the other way, emphasizing how our powers of perception and discovery invariably work in tandem with our powers of expression. Creative articulation renders visible what we find significant and salient. Thus, inimical to the restrictive ideals of mechanical order and neatly trimmed schedule of moral duties commonly associated with the European enlightenment, the romantics placed special emphasis on those irreducible experiences of meaning that testify against our being metaphysical aliens in the natural world and atomistic partners in the cultural one. Folded within such experiences are deeply troubling aspects a rationalist would think any good sense of meaningful order could do well without. Why welcome back subterranean, uncanny, and numinous disturbances into our (aesthetic, moral, and religious) lives? Folded within this question, left and right hermeneutical hemispheres do confess their faiths, alternately opposing and complementing one another (McGilchrist, 2009).

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This overall preoccupation with meaning and characteristic allergy to reductionism is itself an iteration of what we could already tell from the familiar topics that draw the attention of romantics. Personal love is a source of meaning that is felt to be not only of the highest worth but particularly resistant to rational analysis. It should be no surprise it proves such a stumbling block and great offense to good order. Crucial to preserve is the immediacy of love, not only in respect to its bloom and innocence, but to its autonomous salience and mystery apart from the otherwise necessary structures and demands of social and material existence. Some romantics even sought to protect the sacred nature of personal love from the institution of marriage itself, too allied as the latter has been with custom, political interest, or theological heteronomy. In any case, without the inspiring perplexities of love, we would have neither Plato nor the Bible, nor Sigmund Freud. And without *these* we would be without over three quarters of our most significant vocabulary. Moreover, for romantics, personal love is also a rich and illuminating metaphor for articulating the structure of meaning in other registers. In terms of a love of wisdom or nature, we find rapturous and melancholy accounts of the physical world and even philosophy itself. Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* is a kind of paradigm understanding of the natural environment as akin to us, as something we can in fact love, in contrast to a lifeless and mechanistic substrate consisting only of "primary qualities." Even more dramatically, in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel breathlessly claims "the True is thus the Bacchanalian revel in which no member is not drunk; yet because each member collapses as soon as he drops out, the revel is just as much transparent and simple repose" (Hegel, 1977: 27). Within the same "system" of thought, one could expect a similar structure of meaning throughout; for example, marriage is understood as a stable, prosaic commitment in which every day is a celebration. And that is just the sort of thing a romantic would say it was. Even our civic and economic lives can be drawn into the revel, as in the cases of Charles Fourier or Walt Whitman.

As a central locus of all this meaning, Hegel presciently calls particular attention to modern-personal-Christian-romantic love, with all its "subjective spiritual depth of feeling." Whether or not it is helpful to claim such love "does not occur in classical art," the remarkable bit of phenomenology Hegel provides opens up a familiar, though not for that reason unstirring vista:

> What constitutes the infinity of love is this losing, in the other, one's consciousness of self, this splendor of disinterestedness and selflessness through which alone the person finds himself again and becomes a self, this self-forgetfulness in which the lover does not exist, live and care for

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> himself, but finds the roots of his being in another, and yet in this other does entirely enjoy precisely himself; and beauty is chiefly to be sought in the fact that this emotion does not remain mere impulse and emotion but that imagination builds its whole world up into this relation; everything else which by way of interests, circumstances, and aims belongs otherwise to actual being and life, it elevates into an adornment of this emotion; it tugs everything into this sphere and assigns value to it only in its relation thereto (Hegel, 1975: I, 563).

Perhaps we should say this vista *would* be familiar, *mutatis mutandis*, to anyone who has been in love. But what makes it remarkable, and troubling, is the way in which it contains within itself the very seeds of those dramatic collisions that shed such spectacular and heart-wrenching light on our inner, spiritual lives.

> On the one hand stands the objective world as such, family life, political ties, citizenship, laws, *droit*, ethics, etc., and [on the other hand], contrasted with this explicitly firm sphere, love burgeons in noble and fiery hearts; this secular religion of the heart now unites with religion in every way, now subordinates it to itself and forgets it. Since it makes itself alone into the essential and even the sole or supreme business of life, not merely can it decide to sacrifice everything else and fly with the beloved into a desert, but in its extreme, where indeed it is unbeautiful, it proceeds to the unfree, slavish, and shameless sacrifice of the dignity of man (Hegel, 1975: I, 565).

The main problem, according to Hegel, is that the sort of meaning romantic love provides, on its own, lacks "absolute *universality*." It "does not truly correspond with the totality which an inherently concrete individual must be."

> In the family, marriage, duty, and the state, it is not subjective feeling as such and the consequential unification with just this individual and no other, which should be the chief thing at issue. But in romantic love everything turns on the fact that this man loves precisely this woman, and she him. The sole reason why it is just this man or this individual woman alone is grounded in the person's own private character, in the contingency of caprice (Hegel, 1975: I, 566–7).

Of course, it usually doesn't feel capricious. Rather, the very irreplaceability of the beloved directly corresponds to an "inherently concrete individuality." Even so, the gamut of possible conflicts and diremptions is clear. In the words of Chateaubriand's *René*, "the heart is an unfinished instrument, a lyre missing some of its strings, on which we are forced to render the

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accents of joy in a tone dedicated to lamentation" (Chateaubriand, 1980: 97). From an aesthetic point of view, it is thus no surprise Hegel finds us "smiling through tears" as we attend to "the sweet melody, the song in all art" (Hegel, 1975: I, 159).

When one turns to those artists who offer up their hymns in this regard, we find a multiplicity of foci, comportment, and background metaphysic. The focus may be social or individual; the comportment dark and searching, or movingly optimistic; the background metaphysic might be materialist, supernaturalistic, or simply uncanny. The tradition includes not only Friedrich Schlegel's *Lucinda* but also Alfred de Musset's *Confessions of a Child of the Century*, not to mention Wordsworth's *Prelude*. At times we find ourselves attuned to resonances with the natural environment while exploring the vast and untrammeled inner life of great but troubled souls. At other times we are confronted with the everyday lives of the poor and disenfranchised, as in *Oliver Twist* and *Les Misérables*. At still other times the preoccupations of the social novel dramatically overlap with the heartbreaks of personal love, as in Dostoevsky's epistolary *Poor Folk*. All told, the feelings involved form a crucible that endlessly reveals the perplexities of moral agency in relation to anything we have ever cared about.

Meditating on the capacity of art to simultaneously express and educate our passions and perceptions, and if not to reconcile us to reality, then at least provide the opportunity to sow with tears the seeds of our better selves, Kierkegaard suggests there is some confusion about whether aesthetics can make use of suffering in this regard. His pseudonym Frater Taciturnus hints that since poetry is neither a poor house nor a hospital, and even less a colony of lovesick depressives, then it looks as if heroism must be reserved for ruddy-cheeked conquerors (Kierkegaard, 1988: 458–9). In this he presumably has a shallower "classical" aesthetic in mind, but this does not prevent him from offering his own pensive and bracing diary about the risk and opportunity of intertwining our lives with another in such a way that duty is drowned in desire and the dangers of faithlessness are ever present. As for the sick and poor, in an ironic twist Taciturnus unsentimentally remarks it would be unmerciful to exclude those who are *not* hunchbacked or destitute from our list of chosen ones (Kierkegaard, 1988: 460). Suggesting his own gothic overlap, the love-sick diarist self-describes a leper who discovers a magic salve that turns his symptomology invisible while rendering the contagion airborne (Kierkegaard, 1988: 232).

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2 In Vino Veritas

Stages on Life's Way contains four parts. The centerpiece is an anonymous diary that, according to the internal lore of its actual author Frater Taciturnus, was found locked in a box at the bottom of a pond with its key inside. The diary recounts the story of a broken engagement and is given the title "Guilty"/"Not Guilty?" In an ensuing expository "Letter to the Reader," Taciturnus shares what artistic and existential ends he had in mind when conjuring his troubled hero. However, we do not meet the diarist until first hearing from a group of tipsy bachelors about the tragi-comic pitfalls of romantic love in general, followed by a happily married man on what a truly legitimate bachelorhood would imply. These prior sections are entitled "In Vino Veritas," clearly evoking Plato's *Symposium*, and "Some Reflections on Marriage in Answer to Objections." Together with various prefaces and caveats, the whole production is stitched together and published by Hilarious Bookbinder, mainly in the interest of getting the entire collection off his desk, having since lost track of its origin.

Whatever its origin, the final literary form of *Stages* is anything but classical. As if to make Schlegel's *Lucinda* appear a steady and linear specimen of reasonable descent by comparison, *Stages* is a frequently hysterical mash-up of incongruity, ironically showcasing just how poorly it shall count as an ostensible *belle letter*, in Danish or otherwise. The romantic hero at its center is at one point described as a spook, troglodyte, and cave-dweller. He certainly has a penchant for punctuating his diary with Hoffmannesque tales of various mad, lecherous, and diseased polestars. Though *Stages* shares with fellow *Bildungsroman* a preoccupation with the kind of passionate love typically thought to provide a rich and transcendent meaning of human life, *ripae ulterioris amore*, the relationship between the various "stages" lacks resolution (Furst, 1979: 3). The initial sections on love and marriage bring up and out what animates the diarist. Yet it remains unclear whether we should assume he simply understands what the other characters know and have felt, or whether, when it is all stitched together, he knows and feels a great deal more, and does so more reliably. The diarist could be dismissed as confused and unfeeling, a conclusion many readers are tempted to draw. In terms of a final interpretive judgment, much also depends on what the reader knows and has felt, since, as the opening adage alludes, "such works are mirrors: when an ape looks in, no apostle can look out" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 8). All this literary elasticity is *romantisch* par excellent.

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That a divine and mysterious love is somehow above, beneath, and behind all we know and feel, and faithfully attends our perception of what otherwise appears significant and worthwhile is a thesis most certainly familiar from Plato's *Symposium*. Simultaneously one of the oldest and newest of the gods, Eros is our one true guide. It is no surprise Romantics turned to it in an attempt to articulate their disgust over how the "relation of the sexes" is so often subjected to the foreign logic of political, religious, or economic spheres (Daub, 2012). In this, there is no reason to be distracted by Aristotle's culturally *normal* description of marriage as a utilitarian friendship between unequals, not without affection and still emotionally vulnerable to rivals, but clearly dominated by the undignified *anankē* of domestic chores. Socrates was presumably thinking very little about Xanthippe when he pondered the teachings of Diotima, which is precisely what allows Kierkegaard to ingeniously update the original setting of that discussion even as he reinscribes the tragicomic dimensions of its inexplicable presupposition.

This language of inexplicable presuppositions reappears in the opening salvo of "In Vino Veritas," delivered by the Young Man, a rather dreamy and clever, sensitive but inexperienced ironist who, according to the elder Constantin, "does not know whether he should laugh or cry or fall in love" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 47). In that speech he describes, from the outside, the objectively a-rational nature of love. The romantic theme here concerns the epistemological status of subjectivity. The Young Man is fully aware that being "unversed" in matters of love disqualifies him from making judgments about it, and that there is presumably something profoundly self-defeating about his unwillingness "to surrender to an impression before I have fully comprehended the significance of the power to whose control I am surrendering" (Ibid). Yet we cannot help but laugh when he warms himself to his audience by insisting he has definitely *not* adhered to the absurdly ascetic modern method of doubting everything beforehand, *except* in respect to the topic at hand. And his apparent asceticism in this case is especially revealing. What, then, is the objective appraisal?

For starters, unhappy love is supposed to be fatal, yet no one dies of it. Correlatively, its bliss is evidently all too real. Thus, we could suppose that if one survives an unhappy affair, then it must not have been sufficiently real. But it turns out the phenomenon in question, by common testimony, lays claim to an ideality beyond anyone's grasp in the first place and whose actuality is largely attributable to "an imaginary construction in thought." The perplexing truth is that love may nevertheless have the

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power to make the Young Man "gush about a bliss I did not perceive or a pain I did not feel" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 31–2).

"Imaginary construction" connotes our distinctive capacity for producing literary fictions. More fundamentally, it signifies the uniquely human aptitude for self-articulation. This is a basic claim about philosophical anthropology, that "man is the being who is not content to coincide with himself like a thing but represents himself to himself, sees himself, imagines himself, and gives himself rigorous or fanciful symbols of himself" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 225, Gehlen, 1988: 308ff). The Young Man simply appeals to this feature of our existence – widely assumed and profoundly celebrated by all romantics – in order to ironically lampoon what he otherwise deeply respects. His comments leave a tragicomic mark not only on the ensuing speeches of his fellow banqueteers, but also on the rest of *Stages* as a whole. The diarist is himself a highly reflective and excitable bundle of imaginative proclivities, conjured by the psychological ingenuity of Frater Taciturnus. Naturally, this is all guided by Kierkegaard's own pen, for whom imagination "is not a capacity, as are the others – if one wishes to speak in those terms, it is the capacity *instar omnium* [for all capacities]. When all is said and done, whatever of feeling, knowing, or willing a person has depends upon what imagination he has, upon how that person reflects himself" (Kierkegaard, 1980: 30–1). What the various characters in *Stages* agree on is that the felt reality of love is a complex function of a highly receptive yet mediated consciousness. The striking significance of the phenomenon is always also conjured, maintained, articulated, cried over, laughed about, let go of, believed in, remembered, and so on. It is continually imagined and re-imagined. And yet we do not make it up. If and when it arises, love is an immediate gift of the gods, beyond our control. Yet we continually reckon.

The Young Man develops this fundamental 'contradiction' between subjectivity and actuality in his amusing perplexity over not being able to give an account of what is finally loveable about those who suddenly stand before us in all their fully incarnate and arresting particularity as so bewilderingly irreplaceable.

> Aside from the utterly foolish explanations that end in a blind alley, that is, end by saying that it is the beloved's beautiful feet or the lover's much admired handlebar mustache that really is the object of erotic love, even when we hear a lover talking grandiloquently, he first of all mentions various particulars, but finally he says: her whole loveable nature; and when his speech has reached its high point, he says: that inexplicable quality of which I cannot give an account (Kierkegaard, 1988: 35).

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Here we have not just one contradiction, but two, partly because the speech he has imagined "ends in the *inexplicable* and partly because it *ends* there, for anyone who wants to end with the inexplicable would really do best to begin with it and say nothing else in order not to become suspect" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 35). Nor can we solve this riddle by identifying the loveable with "the good" rather than "the beautiful," as Socrates ironically does, since, either way, "no two lovers say the same thing, although they all speak about the same thing" (Ibid). The problem is how any account of love for another person shuttles back and forth between the objective qualities a third party could recognize and the subjective testimony of a lover who is otherwise loathe to appraise the beloved in any other terms than love itself (Plato, 1989: 206a, Singer, 1984: 3ff). The significance of *both* one's love *and* the particular beloved finally appear together in a process Stendhal refers to as "crystallization," apart from which the meaning of love evaporates into either thin air or subjective fancy (Stendal, 1975: 45–7).

Our inability to seamlessly account for the inexplicable, responsive draw of this kind of personal love fits the manner in which it "seizes its prey" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 36). The Young Man imagines someone who has seen hundreds of women; "he may be getting on in years, has felt nothing. Suddenly he sees her, her, the one and only—Catherine" (Ibid). This hysterical introduction of a proper name, presumably out of nowhere, is an echo of the "freemasonry that is a continuation of that first inexplicable something" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 39). Here the Young Man draws on the largely involuntary and unforeseeable nature of the encounter, two features dramatically out of sync with its salience. To make matters worse, that very involuntarily and unforeseeably encountered salience then issues in pledges of devotion. A lover so suddenly struck is now suddenly promising to remain so struck. More confusing still, the pledge is then sealed with a kiss. How baffling that two spiritually structured beings so charmed and wedded in their deepest personalities would then consummate this fact by sharing a brief exchange of saliva. "The psychical at its loftiest finds its expression in the extreme opposite, and the sensual wants to signify the psychical at its loftiest" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 29). It is certainly difficult to explain how and why some form of physical communion in which we mingle our flesh attends relationships that are supposed to express our highest imaginative and spiritual aspirations. One falls for another's look, the curve of their neckline, and so on, but then experiences this as a manifestation of their virtues of thought and character, which then leads one back to their neckline. Diotima's account of this

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transubstantiation, from Bathsheba to the beauty of the Athenian constitution to "Beauty in itself," remains deeply mysterious, to say the least. Merleau-Ponty states the matter with plain boldness. "Metaphysics—the coming to light of something beyond nature—is not localized at the level of knowledge: it begins with the opening out upon 'another,' and is to be found everywhere, and already, in the specific development of sexuality" (Plato, 1989: 210a–211c, Merleau-Ponty, 1989: 168). For the Young Man this is all very perplexing, and finally tragic, if it were not so comic. And the ambiguity of it all frightens him.

In the end, the speech by this ironically detached, sensitive intellectual counts as indirect praise. After all, the Young Man does accurately describe how we inexplicably respond to another and ascribe an involuntary, subjectively invested worth to the beloved beyond any reasonably objective appraisal. He also rightly points out how the seemingly selfish dimensions of romantic feelings walk hand-in-hand with a newfound sense of our own incompleteness, how we come to need someone, but need them to be themselves, and so become ourselves as if for the first time by relinquishing that self to another. Nor is the (wonderful) irony with which families are begun from so inwardly looking a bond lost on the Young Man. While he quips about the math when, assuming a woman has not enjoyed the "social esteem" a man begins with, we do not get one out of two, but two from one and a half, and cites the alarming nomenclature when "Catherine" prosaically turns into "mom," these veiled references to Aristophanes' and Diotima's speeches evoke the very real equivalent of oneness and childbirth romantics undergo in becoming *part* of a shared creative venture rather than remaining independently self-satisfied wholes (Plato, 1989: 189–93, 205–9).

Speaking next, if Constantin Constantinius chose an adage for himself, it would be from Andreas Capellanus: "love is always either increasing or decreasing" (Capallanus, 1960: 30). Aesthetically considered, to it belongs the "pristine privilege [of being] transfigured in the most innocent and forgivable galimatias in less than twenty-four hours" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 49). The only constant here is change. Pejoratively speaking, love is inflammable, whimsical, unpredictable, frivolous, deceptive, and therefore confusing. But that is only from a boringly moral point of view. Our job is to acknowledge the "jest" and take delight in "all those eruptions out of an inviolable romanticism" that "stream out and bestow bliss on the adorer" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 52). The danger here would be to become a particular kind of cuckold, crabbedly jealous of additional incitements by vainly attempting to steady the locomotion. But other than avoiding this supercilious fate, we should enjoy love for what it is, just as one might

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"in balancing a cane on his nose, in swinging a glass without spilling its contents, in dancing among eggs, and doing other similar routines just as entertaining as they are useful" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 52). If the Young Man is variously anxious about either dying of unhappy love or recovering just fine, this need not mean love is not real, but rather that love is so surprisingly and wonderfully changeable we must simply learn to appreciate how over half the happily married people we meet may very well be walking dead. Indeed, so amusingly provocative is it to meet a corpse in real life, Constantin is genuinely surprised this fact is not used more in theatrical productions (Kierkegaard, 1988: 54).

If Constantinius thinks the reality and therefore significance of love is only threatened by our taking it too seriously, Victor Eremita is more earnest. The trouble that gives Eremita pause is not that love is changeable, but that it is all-encompassing, spreading incommensurability everywhere. Love becomes more complex and compounded the more it draws into its sphere of influence, and over the course of a given life, it has the power to inspire and transform one's existence in ways that are impossible to coordinate or even account for. None of this seems harmlessly "provocative," and still less simply amusing. Chiefly, "if the girl's name is Juliane, then her life is as follows: 'Formerly empress in the vast outskirts [*Overdrev*] of erotic love and titular queen of all exaggerations [*Overdrivelser*] of giddiness, now Mrs. Petersen on the corner of Badstustræde [Bathhouse Street]'" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 57–8). From the other side of the equation, many a man has become a genius, a hero, a poet, or a saint because of a girl—

> but he did not become a genius because of the girl he got, for with her he only became a cabinet official; he did not become a hero because of the girl he got, for because of her he only become a general; he did not become a poet because of the girl he got, for because of her he only became a father; he did not become a saint because of the girl he got, for he got none at all and only wanted the one and only he did not get (Kierkegaard, 1988: 59).

With this Eremita invokes the classically romantic notion that while the deeply perplexing and unaccountable experience of love is precisely what inspires creative ventures of all kinds, rendering the Polis warm and exciting by means of Eros, such inspiration is predicated on actual love remaining unrealized. Thus, Eremita too does not know what to make of it. Is it pure fantasy, or the noblest, most productive experience we can have? All he says about fully actualized love is that it "scarcely arouses ideality" (Ibid). He thus concludes that while indeed all-encompassing,

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the meaning of love is entirely "negative." Intensely significant and inspiring as it may be, its positive meaning remains concealed though ever present (Kierkegaard, 1988: 60–1).

After this thoroughly gallant though largely negative appraisal, Eremita turns to a correspondingly expansive and all-inclusive hermeneutic of marriage as a supposedly romantic institution. As concrete and positive as marriage is, and because he takes it as seriously as love itself, he is not sure what to make of it either:

> Just as turtle meat has a taste of all kinds of meat, so marriage has a taste of everything, and just as the turtle is a slow creature, so also is marriage. Falling in love is indeed something simple, but a marriage! Is it something pagan or something Christian, something sacred or something secular, or something civil or a little of everything? Is it the expression of the inexplicable eroticism, that *Wahlverwandtschaft* [elective affinity] between kindred souls, or is it a duty, or is it a partnership or an expediency in life or the custom in certain countries, or is it a little of everything? Is the town musician or the organist to furnish the music—or should we have a little of both; should the pastor or the police sergeant give the talk and inscribe their names in life's register—or in the municipal register; is it in comb-and-paper music that marriage can be heard or does it listen to that whisper that sounds like "the fairies' from the grottos on a summer night? (Kierkegaard, 1988: 63).

After this litany of dichotomies, the blessed unity of which he cannot fathom, Eremita predictably returns to his original theme to conclude that if "a positive relationship to woman is thinkable, then it has to be so reflective that for this very reason it would not become a relationship with her" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 64). What follows is an even more consistently bizarre inference: "To be an exceptional husband and yet secretly seduce every girl, to seem to be a seducer and yet hide all the ardor or romanticism within one would really be something—yet the concession to the first power is invariably destroyed in the second" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 64–5). Perhaps mimicking a Hegelian dialectic, Eremita tempts us with how, nevertheless, "every man has his true ideality only in a reduplication. Every immediate existence must be annihilated and the annihilation constantly safeguarded by a false expression. Woman cannot grasp a reduplication such as that; it makes it impossible for her to state man's nature" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 65). Together, love and marriage form a whole, incorporating other totalities of meaning within itself; however, "since her nature so obviously is as it is, there is a disturbance of the erotic condition of man's nature, which continually has its life in the annihilation of that in which she has her life" (Ibid). Presumably, these are

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internal dynamics within human nature as such, whether male or female. In any case, the reader is left hanging in that Eremita resolutely denies the logical conclusion of his namesake: "Away with the monastery. It, too, is only an immediate expression of spirit, and spirit cannot be expressed immediately" (Ibid). We thus face not an either/or, but a particular neither/nor: neither the monastery nor a prosaically recalled trip to Deer Park, each as uninspiringly determinate as the other. In refusing to have a restricted, important but partial significance, love wreaks havoc.

At this point the Fashion Designer jumps to his feet and upsets a bottle of wine. He can barely wait to chime in, "practically and from the ground up without all that theoretical fuss" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 66). Predictably, given his profession, what he apparently knows is that the powerful draw in question, the true meaning and significance of the aesthetic dimension, really amounts to a carefully gilded, external impression. Put cynically, love is a material fabrication that can be bought and sold. On this interpretation, the laws of attraction and subsequent creative inspiration are entirely uncoupled from both natural and human values, and may very well end, as the Designer churlishly threatens, with "a ring in the nose" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 71). Quite without the help of any theoretical fuss indeed, he shamelessly writes:

> Whether I am serving the devil or the god, I do not know, but I am right and I am determined to be right. I will be right as long as I have a single farthing; I am determined to be right until the blood spurts from my fingers. The physiologist draws a woman's shape in order to show the terrible results of corsets; alongside he draws the normal shape. This is correct, but only the one has the validity of actuality; they all wear corsets (Kierkegaard, 1988: 70).

In spite of this perverse aesthetic enterprise, the Fashion Designer too has a positive but problematic point to make about romantic ideals. We know there is something more going on because, whether we believe him or not, he claims: "I supply the finest and the most expensive things at the cheapest price—indeed, I sell below cost. Hence I am not out to gain—no, every year I lose huge sums" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 66–7). For what, then, is the Designer willing to throw away his money, quite unlike a conscientious entrepreneur? The conditions under which he interacts with clients, the protocol they appear to follow, and the conflicted response this seems to elicit, tell all:

> Just as there are a special bathing costume and a riding costume, so there is also a special attire that is in vogue to wear for going to the boutique. This costume is not as casual as the negligee in which a lady

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> likes to be surprised earlier in the forenoon. The whole point then is her femininity and coquetry in letting herself be surprised. Her boutique attire, on the other hand, is calculated to be casual, a bit frivolous without thereby causing embarrassment, because a fashion designer has a relation to her quite different from a cavalier's. The coquetry consists in appearing this way before a man, who, because of his position, does not dare claim the lady's feminine recognition but must be satisfied with the uncertain profits that richly pay off but without her thinking about it or without her dreaming of wanting to be the lady in relation to a fashion designer. Thus the whole point is that femininity is in a way left out and coquetry is invalidated in the exclusive superiority of the distinguished lady, who would smile if anyone were to allude to such a relationship. In her negligee on the occasion of a [surprise] call, she covers herself and thereby gives herself away; in the boutique she uncovers herself with utmost nonchalance, for it is only a fashion designer—and she is a woman. Now the shawl slips down a bit and shows a little white skin—if I do not know what that means and what she wants, then my reputation is lost. Now she puckers her lips apriorally, then gesticulates aposteriorally; now she wriggles her hips, then looks in the mirror and sees my admiring face; now she lisps, walks with a mincing gate, then hardly seems to touch the floor; now she trails her foot daringly, sinks weakly into an armchair, while I obsequiously hand her a scent-flacon and cool her with my adoration; now she roguishly hits at me with her hand, then drops her handkerchief and lets her hand remain in a loose, drooping position, while I bow low and pick it up, offer it to her, and receive a little patronizing nod. This is how a woman of fashion deports herself in a boutique (Kierkegaard, 1988: 67–8).

What provides the Fashion Designer with such delight, for which he is willing to pay his last farthing, is the opportunity of clandestinely interacting with patrons who under the pretense of propriety agree to trade favors. But what is the point of all this "sneaky trafficking?" Chiefly, the Fashion Designer conveys how intimate relationships are clothed in expressive forms that culturally shape our imagination and occur within a play of possible moral worlds. Witness how the specific manner of listlessly dropping a handkerchief in order to elicit amorous recognition involves a subtle balance between hidden motivation and revealed intention. From fig leaf to the broad cloth, fashion plays a mediating role in an essentially embodied dialectic of recognition wherein shame and immodesty take their place. Merleau-Ponty once again:

> in so far as I have a body, I may be reduced to the status of an object beneath the gaze of another person, and no longer count as a person for him, or else I may become his master and, in my turn, look at *him*. But this mastery is self-defeating, since, precisely when my value is recognized

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> through the other's desire, he is no longer the person by whom I wished to be recognized, but a being fascinated, deprived of his freedom, and therefore no longer counts in my eyes (Merleau-Ponty, 1989: 167).

Our agency in this regard can be tragic, but we are not powerless, and a fashionable self-expression can be either morally sensitive or casually seductive. Ideally, the particular form a given expression takes should be as authentic as it is alluring, drawing us toward each other without mortification. Within the tightly circumscribed world of the boutique, love and its vicissitudes are fastidiously tied to the ephemera of a contrived physical presence rather than baldly given over to a nakedly natural one. But playing off the possibilities within this invigorating dialectic the Fashion Designer comically claims to preside over our social graces. He thereby lets us in on a secret we already in some sense knew: our clothes matter because of the naked self they reveal. Something like the same would apply to any, perhaps all, of our tastes and corresponding costumes.

Johannes the Seducer is a spokesman for the erotic dimension in its purest, untrammeled form, and it may be the topic of fashion that brings it up. For what is fashion at its finest but the uselessly delightful play of aesthetic appearance? More generally, and independently of both libidinal impulses and romantic trajectories, we are surrounded by a virtually gravitational, affective tug that unaccountably draws us to a visual field populated by images amenable to thought and feeling which exert their force without prosaic content. The pure category here is beauty. And like a laborer who returns to the shop after hours to make what he himself cares about, it is above all our imagination that is ready for its seduction, and once awakened, eager to reciprocate with its tokens. So much in art that is strictly aesthetic has this mysterious, a-rational, tangibly intangible quality in which everything seems a living metaphor, always more meaningful than we can say. And if Hegel is correct, it all points to something like a divine life, a self-conscious subjectivity, sensuously embodied and housed in a surrounding world of inanimate structures, "just as the statues of a god have a temple" (Hegel, 1975: 244). Naturally, the central character in the overall drama is an Aphrodite Pandemos, who both awakens and is awakened. It is paradigmatically the beauty of a person that draws out of us the very finest acts of courage, piety, and ingenuity. As if directly inspired by the musician and painter, Johannes describes its central features:

> … as delicate and ethereal as if of the mists of a summer night, and yet rounded as ripe fruit; light as a bird although she bears a world of desire within her, light because the play of forces is unified in the

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> invisible center of a negative relationship in which she relates herself to herself; slim and firm, with clearly defined contours and yet to the eye surging with the undulations of beauty; complete and yet continually as if she were just now finished; cool, delicious, refreshing as the new-fallen snow, and yet blushing in tranquil transparency; happy as a pleasantry that lets one forget everything … she is right here, present, close to us, and yet she is infinitely far away, concealed in modesty until she herself betrays her hiding place—how, she does not know; it is not she, it is life itself that is the cunning informer. She is roguish, like a child at play who peeks out of its hiding place, and yet her roguishness is inexplicable, for she herself is unaware of it, and she is always enigmatic—enigmatic when she hides her eyes, enigmatic when she sends out the emissary of a glance that no thought, even less any word, is able to pursue. And yet if the glance is the soul's "interpreter," where then is the explanation when the interpreter himself speaks incomprehensibly (Kierkegaard, 1988: 77–8).

On the surface, Johannes himself interprets all this as the bait on the hook of marriage. Which is accurate in the sense that aesthetic affinities do often subtend a romantic trajectory, though they are also just as separable from romantic aims as they are irreducible to libidinal impulses (Singer, 1995: 52–70). But the salient point is about the great, indeed divine gift of beauty, which, when added, is probably what makes anything – from truth and goodness to pots and pans – worthwhile.

3 A Bourgeois-Romantic Synthesis

In the manuscript Eremita pilfers from Judge William entitled "Reflections on Marriage in Answer to Objections," its author has a specific understanding of marriage in mind. He means to describe a markedly romantic understanding of marriage as the highest *telos* of human life in two senses. First, he understands the married state as the objective fulfillment of a subjective requirement and the relationship itself as the concrete focal point that personally integrates our moral, aesthetic, and religious values. Secondly, as the highest aim of human flourishing, marriage is not subordinate to other social, economic, or political purposes, including parenthood, but has independently sacred significance. The "objections" have to do with the coherence and feasibility of the dialectical-synthetic description William offers. In terms of *Stages* as a whole, the objections are best understood as a challenge to the existential meaning married love provides, or in artistically dramatic terms, the kind of heroism it involves. Much will depend on how we estimate the emotional weight of its laughter and tears.

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Like how the banqueteers ironically assign a positive significance to personal love that they otherwise lampoon, Judge Williams' healthy-minded confidence retains a rhetorical ambiguity as a lead up to the particular pathos of the diarist. The very structure of Williams' argument even draws on the descriptive–prescriptive ambiguity of teleological approaches to human development in general. Thus, we find that in actuality, and ideally – or ideally, and in actuality – the ethical bond characteristic of marriage is a synthesis of disparate and even opposing elements: a combination of falling in love and resolution, sealed in heaven but endorsed in time, just as epic as it is idyllic, just as natural as it is religious, a happy blend of altruistic egoism. As a result, each of these synthetic claims stands out as both fortuitous and potentially troubling. For instance, he boldly declares:

> Let a poor wretch who does not have an understanding with the temporal in the resolution of marriage nurse the sick, feed the poor, clothe the naked; let him visit the prisoner, let him comfort the dying—I commend him, he will not miss his reward, but neither is he in divine madness an unprofitable servant. His sympathy is continually seeking its deepest expression but does not find it, seeks it far and wide as his solicitude goes from house to house, whereas the married man finds opportunity in his house, in his home, where to him it is bliss to will to do everything, and an even greater bliss, a divine *poscimur* [we are called upon], that he is and remains without meritoriousness (Kierkegaard, 1988: 113–4).

Presumably the ideal here is that our most significant moral responses would somehow be expressions of our own deepest pleasure, but this passage is full of fault lines. Might one not take a deeper pleasure in visiting a prisoner than in hosting the in-laws? Or may there not be a profound complacency in celebrating one's lack of moral effort? Such questions call to mind how Jane Addams was tempted to advise leisured young couples hiking in the Alps to use some of their energy for urban renewal. "Their stores of enthusiasm might stir to energy listless men and women of East London and utilize latent social forces. The exercise would be quite as good, the need of endurance as great, the care for proper dress and food as important; but the motives for action would be turned from selfish to social ones" (Addams, 1902: 91–2).

Though there is room enough for moral and emotional sloth, William's account need not ring hollow. The pretentions of his syntheses are delivered with great subtlety. When discussing how the involuntary immediacy of falling in love must be completed by ethical resolve, for example, he cites a version of Aladdin who wishes the jinni would make each of his days with his beloved like the first. Such a wish, William suggests, expresses a poetic

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genius that anxiously knows better. Naturally, Aladdin is "wrong" to want his ongoing agency resolved for him. That would be cowardly. Nevertheless, he is right to wish his future self could effortlessly draw strength from his present desire. How else might one avoid Eremita's objection that "there is nothing as self-willed and as tyrannical as marriage" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 63)? On just this point, however, Judge William declares that no one understands this threat better than one who is in love, and so no one is better prepared to venture "out of infatuation's hiding place" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 116). But what *will* happen, or indeed, what *cannot* happen, out there with one's infatuation fully exposed? There is no way to know. Were one to devote himself to this thought, "his hair would certainly turn gray in a single night" (Ibid). Nevertheless, "this he does know—he can lose everything; and this he does know—he cannot evade a single thing, for the resolution holds him firmly where his love imprisons him but also holds him undaunted there where falling in love laments" (Ibid). So described, this confidence is not particularly arrogant or unassailable, but humble, meek, and melancholy. Still, an ambiguity remains. If merely wishing our love might remain pure does not make it so, would deeply and profoundly wishing it do the job? What William is really addressing here is the difficulty of understanding romantic love *as itself a moral capacity*.

When the married Judge pompously rattles off his honorary titles and "ribbons of my order" – Husband, Father, Breadwinner, Defender of the Home – the perils he has in mind are certainly those felt by anyone romantically invested (Kierkegaard, 1988: 93). In fact, he only sounds pompous on the assumption he has neither an innermost thought in his head nor a more tender strain in his heart other than the glories of his own stalwart manhood. But it is precisely the "thrones, principalities, and fortunes" of the latter that William especially contrasts with the darker, intimate struggle of the modern hero. The fault line lay elsewhere, and his own case is particularly revealing when, after listing his familial rank, he confesses that even "if I could mean something to more people by being an author, I would prefer to mean as much as possible to my wife" (94). And then right at the end of his manuscript he reports that this dear wife has just passed his door – obviously waiting, though not hovering. William hesitates – "my soul is so rich, I am so eloquent at this moment I want to write it down on paper" – yet chooses to follow the beckoning of his wife. But not before jotting down a final, rather lengthy sentence:

> Let a wretched author sit trembling when a thought presents itself in a lucky moment, shivering lest someone disturb him—I am afraid of nothing, but I also know what is better than the most felicitous idea in

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> a man's mind and better than the most felicitous expression on paper of the most felicitous idea and what is infinitely more precious than any secret a poor author can have with his pen (Kierkegaard, 1988: 184).

On the one hand, this strikes one as vaguely bombastic, and certainly ironic from a point of view outside the manuscript; and yet, William seems to know something about the secret, even conspiratorial lure of ideas – especially ideas about love – ideas so intricately and passionately rendered they could virtually rival the thing itself. For on the other hand, books are love letters. Or they can be. Thus, we cannot simply dismiss Judge William as a sententious member of the bourgeoise. He seems genuinely conflicted about whether, as a husband, he is, or can be, a poet as well. And clearly, behind this anxiety, is whether, as a husband, he is, and must be, a lover as well.

These riddling nuances bring us back to what preeminently occupies William: the immediacy of falling in love. The conceptual terminology of "immediacy" plays throughout *Stages* like a Hegelian warble. It is a crucial category for romantic epistemology, for although our subjective involvement as knowers is not only admitted but welcomed, only someone like Fichte seemed comfortable with understanding the self as the founding source of meaning all told. For most of us, everything we wonder and care about must involuntarily strike us first, immediately, from outside ourselves, with an initially unaccountable yet gloriously undeniable objective significance. The difficult joy we take, later, in providing an account of this immediacy, would itself be meaningless without it. To use the Platonic metaphor, while we do give birth to whole worlds, out of ourselves, only the hysterically pregnant do so all on their own.

Unsurprisingly, William seems to have in mind the Young Man's speech, the very "beginning" of the text. Recall how the Young Man almost disqualifies himself from saying anything at all given that, supposedly, he lacks the experience, having never fallen in love. Recall too that we come to doubt his naivete, given what he ends up saying, and the humor and sadness with which he says it. He may have immediately run from the experience, refused to fully acknowledge it, or in some other way intentionally distanced himself from it, for example – according to his own admission – by trying to comprehend it ahead of time. Yet he does seem to speak rather knowledgably about its mystery. In his own way, William agrees with the detached young bachelor: the reality of (falling in) love "remains intact, no thought reaches it, it is a wonder" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 147). This divine dispensation, this gift of the gods, so holy and unsettling, remains sublimely impervious to any "criticism." Whether it is sought based on hearsay or

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feared based on casual acquaintance, all of us are equally unprepared. But apart from it there is also little else to feel, say, or do.

Nevertheless, although the involuntary immediacy of love originates with the gods and remains impervious to all prior "critique," just as undeniably and even unaccountably does some kind of response, some commentary, some series of cultural mediations follow. Almost as soon as our ears and eyes are open, we find the warble arrives with a libretto and liner notes, sometimes more unsettling than holy, depending. Perhaps everything thereafter depends. Even so, Judge William rivetingly describes the *appropriate* response to falling in love, the response that is indeed the most faithful to the experience, namely, the resolve to have and to hold till death does its part. To be clear, such resolve is *not* a response to the weakness of love, unable on its own to sustain its own significance over time. On the contrary, it is a testimony to the power of love that it would just as involuntarily elicit so dramatic and irrational a pledge.

How, then, might we account for the Aladdins in this story, all those who have somehow fallen short of falling in love? Without betraying any sense of irony beyond which Kierkegaard himself orchestrates, Judge William simply declares "by this time love is already a subsequent immediacy, a heat lightning that commences at a time when the will may be sufficiently developed to comprehend a resolution just as crucial as falling in love, taken in its immediacy, is crucial." He then ends with a caveat:

> Love is the gift of the god, but in the resolution of marriage the lovers make themselves worthy of receiving it. Be life ever so paradisiacal, to leave out the resolution is unbeautiful, and just as unbeautiful in the direction of spirit as it is unbeautiful in the opposite direction, that adolescents marry (Kierkegaard, 1988: 148).

We may wonder what "subsequent immediacy" and "sufficient development" imply in this context. Presumably they refer to all that comes after, not only in terms of ideas, but also in terms of moral development, developments of the will, and so closely related, developments of the imagination, none of which occur outside a field of cultural institutions, unarticulated by some practical nomenclature. With adolescence in mind, so beautiful and ugly a time, it seems the overall prospect of any "subsequent immediacy" is slim to none, since, if adolescents are not ready to marry, they are not ready to fall in love either. But if not then, when? The obvious answer is also the most troubling: when the various elements

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of the "life of the spirit" are all aligned – when the artistic and religious institutions of an overall social order have been sufficiently developed, including an appropriate venue for courtship, and when that social order is then inhabited by at least one other person equally suited in emotional and intellectual development and who is not otherwise engaged. Judge William seems aware of how tall and properly rendered this order actually is, which may explain why he spends what might seem an inordinate amount of time addressing Goethe's *Aus meinem Leben*. Perhaps with Goethe we have a person of genuine taste and piety – a truly cultured romantic – who can properly inform us about love.

Relevantly, William does not look to Goethe's artistic productions for practical guidance, but neither does he look to Goethe's actual, presumably exemplary life, which he considers "extraneous." What he apparently expects from the "autobiography" of the poet is a realistic but not pedestrian vision, inspired but not make-believe. The portrait he finds, however, is less than morally beautiful. As he reads it, the "poetic lover" is not a seducer, not a connoisseur. So far so good. However, while he is chivalrous, he is nevertheless a subterfuge (Kierkegaard, 1988: 149). Falling in love easily, the so-called romantic politely and amicably and sympathetically backs out of various affairs in which he finds himself entangled. A poetic existence such as this can appear benign, but its very aesthetic detachment is disingenuous. The poet's deep feeling and chivalry are certainly moving, but even then what is engaging is invariably forlorn, "the strangest romance of sad events," as Goethe himself puts it (Goethe, 1902: 178). As a judge, William feels he is diagnosing a case that contains neither the galvanizing power of Eros nor the authentic gravity of resolution and concludes that the entire existential portrait amounts to an affecting pantomime of actual love, more vaudevillian than inspiring:

> He sorrows a little over the poor girl, it is not pretense, he really sorrows—no, really! This, however, is carrying politeness rather far; it is, after all, a sympathy and condolence that will only increase the pain. The break itself or, to put is more precisely and accurately, this polite and amicable agreement about a departure is precisely what is most insulting; this final forgery, that any girl, when it is established that a man has a contractual obligation, should not be a preemptory creditor, is really the most shocking thing of all, and yet it is with this politeness that he bought the world's forgiveness. Oh, the sorrowing lover! He is sorrowing not over his instability, over this flare-up of ardor, over this shift in the world of the spirit, not over his sins (Kierkegaard, 1988: 151).

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Then the Judge's cross examination takes a surprising turn. He can very well understand full-blown seducers and connoisseurs as corrupt but consistent. Their cases are clear. In contrast, the romantically distended life Goethe portrays is more opaque, though in its way also more revealing.

> This kind of existence, which essentially is scarcely a paradigm, can nevertheless figuratively assume a paradigmatic character or be paradigmatic by the accident of being an irregular declension, according to which several lives are indeed formed. One dare not say that they form their lives according to it, for they are too innocent [*uskyldig*] for that, and this is precisely their excuse [*Undskyldning*]: it happens to them; they themselves do not know how it happens. Indeed, at times such people are even visionaries who are pursuing the ideal. They do not learn any more from their love affairs than what a lottery player learns from losing (Ibid).

In the very next sentence William admits he is moving beyond Goethe's portrait. Then who or what is the Judge writing about? Apparently, there are irregular declensions who are paradigmatic, at least "figuratively," although William is extremely reticent to admit their legitimacy, since such individuals only become representative by means of an innocently passive, visionary idealism from which they learn nothing of real value. The entire paragraph ends ambiguously. Purportedly returning to Goethe's portrait, William writes that the poetic lover

> is too great not to learn, too superior not to harvest advantage, and if he had been just as ethically inspired as he is gloriously endowed, he, more than anyone else, would have discovered and solved the problem: whether there is an intellectual existence so eminent that in the profoundest sense it cannot become commensurable with the erotic, for the response that one loves many times, that one parcels out one's superiority, is merely a disorientation that neither esthetically nor ethically satisfies what could be termed a decent man's more serious demand upon life (Kierkegaard, 1988: 151–2).

At least one of these irregular but paradigmatic declensions could stand apart in being less passive about it, having actively and honestly identified though not entirely solved the real problem. But what kind of life would it be to discover and admit, and genuinely grieve over how one's life and proclivities were somehow incommensurate with romance fully realized?

On the one hand, a good deal of what William is reflecting on is the long-standing experience of summer loves that bloom and fade and the peculiar staying power they nevertheless have over our imagination.

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Romantic literature is replete with the timeless spectacle of desire in the proximity of some cottage down by the lake, surrounded by lush trees and gentle winds, gloriously set apart from everyday life, bursting with leisurely picnics, afternoon swims, sand-castles, sun-kissed shoulders, campfires, and stolen glances, all retrospectively preserved in a present tense of sad unreality. Once felt, the memory of it never entirely leaves us alone, and poetry is often its muse in reverse. On the other hand, William introduces another dimension altogether with the possibility of an "intellectual existence so eminent that in the profoundest sense cannot become commensurable with the erotic." This suggests a qualitatively different kind of melancholy than that evoked by the ravages of place and time. Here Kierkegaard (via Judge William) tuck points into the literary architecture of *Stages* a train of thought that anticipates the extended tale of the anonymous diarist who both seems and himself feels irregular, but not because he is a weak-willed subterfuge who lacks genuine imagination. Here we are talking about a personality set apart by romantic ideals beyond mere aesthetic ones (assuming there are such merely aesthetic ideals).

The attention William pays to Goethe's portrait of a poetic existence was intended to illuminate how moral resolve can correspond to the involuntary immediacy of falling in love, ideally issuing in a "subsequent immediacy." Such resolve typically occurs at the end of a detour – long or short, corrupt or innocent – whereabout our will undergoes the transfiguration of some significant emotional-cultural development. However, in his ("defensive") treatment of the topic, both the poetic hero and his love interests each appear somewhat idolatrous, golden calves lovely to behold but essentially lifeless. William is clearly wrestling with the degree to which our imaginations play a creative role in shaping our feelings and perceptions. Our personal loves and romantic ideals more generally are both natural and constructed, divinely dispensed and humanly penned, immediately given and poetically created, in and out of an original welter and waste. To be sure, we really do live through the stories we read and tell, the most salient of which are about relationships old and new, broken and healed, reconfigured or perhaps reinvented altogether. We all wish our greatest affections were reciprocally met, our most peculiar feelings concretely shared, and our highest values fully embodied. But for all this to occur, we must strike a delicate balance between fact and fiction, in both word and deed. In this way, William admits Goethe's portrayal of individual love-interests is superb, even honorable, and yet, ambiguously, "it is womanhood that is dishonored in their persons, because in relation

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to them the condescending sensibleness that knows how to enjoy, relish, but also how to distance them and itself when the pleasure is over, almost seems to be justified or at least excusable" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 154). As for the poetic lover himself,

> with regard to the ethical, that distinction whereby one person is a hero, yes, perhaps even as unique as a hero, another a bungler, is totally irrelevant. The ethical is so incorruptible that if our Lord himself had been obliged to allow himself a little irregularity in creating the world, ethics would not let itself be disturbed, although heaven and earth and everything found therein is nevertheless quite a fine masterpiece (Kierkegaard, 1988: 155).

This passage is especially revealing because it so precisely evokes what Judge William must simultaneously maintain as a romantic ethicist. On the one hand, ethics must intervene and provide direction for the wanderlust of passion; but what is aesthetically moving, what makes for a beautiful masterpiece, should not be superintended. Without coming right out and saying it, even the Lord himself is (perhaps) obliged to find a place in the masterpiece of creation for the bookish, melancholy subterfuge, who in addition has been salted by a Moravian upbringing, that we find depicted in *Aus meinem Leben* (Kierkegaard, 1988: 152–5). Or must we conclude it is only someone like Judge William who is in a position to understand the meaning of love, one who after eight years of marriage still cannot say "in a critical sense" what his wife looks like (Kierkegaard, 1988: 125)? Clearly, as far as William *himself* is concerned, the detour our ethical resolve must take should be short and sweet. Above all, one should not sully the purity of falling in love with a critical assessment of the beloved in the light of some aesthetic ideal. Naturally, the trick of the poetic soul is to acknowledge the inimitably embodied manner and look of a beloved from ankle to eyelash as this is inextricably bound up with the way one holds an opinion, delivers a joke, hums a tune, accepts a loss, or recites a prayer. One or another or some combination of these typically ignite though do not amount to love. It appears William would have us pass them over in order to modestly avoid becoming an "insipid babbler" or "birthday poet" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 159).

How does it go, then, when the lover does not twist and turn, does not measure the quality and weight of his experience and consider particulars and imagine alternatives or even hold out for signs of reciprocal feeling? According to William's train of thought, in a "perfectly ideal reflection the resolution has ideally emptied actuality, and the conclusion of this ideal reflection, which is something more than the *summa summarum*

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[sum total] and *enfin* [finally], is precisely the resolution: the resolution is the ideality brought about through a perfectly ideal reflection, which is the action's acquired working capital" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 160). In holding on so tightly to both romantic and ethical ideals, he conjures a vision of love so purified of taciturn thoughts that we are barely allowed to so much as look at the beloved before committing: "For the lover, the most certain of all things is that he is in love, and no meddlesome thoughts, no stockbrokers run back and forth between falling in love and a so-called ideal—this is a forbidden road" (Ibid). Nevertheless, "resolution is always reflective; if this is disregarded, then language is confused and resolution is identified with an immediate impulse, and any statement about resolution is no more an advancement than a journey in which one drives all night but takes the wrong road and in the morning arrives back at the same place from which one departed" (Ibid).

Having painted conscious reflection into such a tight corner, it comes as no surprise that it must be "discharged into faith" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 162). The infatuated immediacy of love that would only serve to carry the lovers away to an illusory island of a-social bliss must be immediately tempered by a religious view of life in which the fragility of human indecision and aesthetic ennui is fortuitously swallowed by a form of passion which can "pave the way, so to speak, for falling in love" and "secure it against any external and internal danger" (Ibid). Still, the reader is again summarily reassured that an ethical resolution "is not so difficult, especially if one has the impetus of the passion of falling in love" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 163). This characterization of the existential task might seem to beg the question, as if romantic passion is both ethically indispensable and unable to preserve itself. But the Judge evidently thinks the sheer fragility of our truest affections contains the elements of their own transubstantiation.

> Precisely because the reflection that precedes the resolution is altogether ideal, a single imagined danger will be enough to bring the one making the resolution to resolve religiously. Let him think what he will, even if the danger is only that he cannot take the future in advance by thinking. In using his powers of thought and his concerned love to think this, he *eo ipso* [precisely thereby] thinks it [the danger] to be so terrible that he cannot surmount it by himself. He has run aground; he must either let go of love—or believe in God. In this way the wonder of falling in love is taken up into the wonder of faith; the wonder of falling in love is taken up into a purely religious wonder; the absurdity of falling in love is taken up into a divine understanding with the absurdity of religiousness (Kierkegaard, 1988: 163).

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It seems the involuntary, inviolable, immediate wonder of love is precisely what drives us toward divine things, just as immediately, once we think about it, and just as soon as our will and imagination have taken a single step toward understanding where we stand. We may even immediately encounter the possibility of moral "anomalies" that expose us to a need for forgiveness and redemption, a need that by no means "promptly comes off in the washing of resolution" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 164). It seems the detour of emotional-cultural maturation, long or short, ends on some holy night, in sin and error pining, that our soul might feel its worth.

What makes *Stages on Life's Way* a work of romanticism *par excellent* is the very way in which threats to the coherence and feasibility of happily married love both do and do not undermine the *meaning* that arises from within those interpersonal exigencies. To be sure, Judge William confidently assumes the person most legitimately prepared for a wedding "does not encounter such anomalies," but rather "returns home from his expedition as the knight from the crusade" only to find he already owned the field in which the pearl of great price lay. But his extended aesthetic and finally religious commentary performs a dramatically *mediating* role in his "ideal" analysis. And so, although William still could not definitely say what his wife looks like after eight years, this does not prevent him from providing a lengthy aesthetic commentary on feminine beauty, from maiden, to bride, to mother, and finally the woman of years who "hovers like an angel over the ark of the covenant" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 133). Tellingly, Judge William suggests only those who are "desperately in love" can look upon a young girl without sadness, knowing as we do, that such beauty is fair to behold, but swift as a dream and thin as an envelope. But what is remarkable about this whole discussion is how squarely it remains within aesthetic categories (Kierkegaard, 1988: 132). The joke about foot corn as a ground for divorce is indeed meant to be amusing (Kierkegaard, 1988: 129). And the disparaging contrast he draws between teenage heartbreak and the death of a child is not an ethical argument; it is a question about the *aesthetic depth and therefore meaning* of sorrow (Kierkegaard, 1988: 141). All told, what could be more romantic, virtually gothic, than for William to claim the most beautiful time of love obscurely reveals itself "as gently as when the grave opens" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 160).

Not only are aesthetic categories preserved, but a kind of religious phenomenology emerges from the Judge's romantic *Aufhebung*:

> Marriage is threatened with dangers from two sides; if the individual has not in faith placed himself in the relationship with God as spirit, paganism haunts his brain as a fantastic reminiscence and he cannot

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> enter into any marriage; and on the other hand neither can he do it if he has become totally spiritual; even if one of the latter type and one of the former type were married, such falling in love or such a match is no marriage (Kierkegaard, 1988: 100–1).

The goal of the truly romantic is thus "to be able to preserve the qualifications inherent in the erotic so that the spiritual does not burn them up and consume them but burns in them without consuming them"(Ibid). In this regard, William ends his analysis with the specter of a particular kind of bachelor, who has made an initial appearance in the context of Goethe's autobiography:

> He recognizes entirely *in abstracto* the reality [*Realitet*] of temporality, or to stick to my theme, the reality of marrying. But he is unhappy, unfit for this joy, for this security in existence; he is depressed, a burden to himself, and feels he must be that to others. Do not be quick to judge—the weaker person also has his rights; and depression is something real that one does not delete with the stroke of the pen (Kierkegaard, 1988: 175).

If such a "religious exception" is going to be legitimate without committing arson against the erotic, then, as a first requirement, the person must actually be in love (Kierkegaard, 1988: 176). Minimally, any sacrifice of significance assumes we truly cherish what is relinquished. Stronger still, insofar as marriage represents the warm attachment to a particular individual and the various concrete projects and activities this entails, to renounce it one must be experientially invested in its reality. Thus, as a second requirement, our "irregular declension" must actually be married (Kierkegaard, 1988: 177). Importantly, this actuality may very well include a role as "captain of the popinjay shooting club" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 170). Other requirements follow that insure the moral gravity of this hypothetical exception to the teleological rule. After the "break," one must not become inimical to life, but continue to love it all the more, for "in this enthusiasm he must find each beautiful thing even more lovely and delightful than does the person who rejoices in happiness, because the one who wills to reject something universal has to be better informed about it than the person who is peacefully living in it" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 178). Furthermore, he must feel the break itself "as a fatality and a horror" and must understand that "in making this step he has ventured out into the trackless infinite space where the sword of Damocles hangs over his head if he looks up toward heaven, and where the snare of unknown temptations clutches at his feet if he looks toward the ground" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 179). Such an exception must know that "no one

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can understand him and must have the composure to reconcile himself to the fact that human language has only curses for him … and must feel the torturing of misunderstanding just as the ascetic constantly felt the prick of the hair shirt …" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 180). Yet, in all this, he still "must not harden his own heart against it, for at the same time he does he is unjustified" (Ibid).

The moral psychology embedded in these requirements calls to mind Johannes de Silentio's characterization of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*. The only heroic way we can understand Abraham's willingness to bind Isaac is to consider what it means to be thoroughly prepared to relinquish a beloved, all the while believing the best, and therefore realistically facing, without anticipating, the worst. Actively loving in the midst of such "infinite resignation" parallels how the legitimate exception to married life must not be listlessly detached though he does not rest easily in the ordinary conditions of temporal life and its deeply personal and specific attachments. To this, William adds that the legitimate exception also cannot know whether they are justified, and in fact "never finds out in this life whether he is" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 183). Although this last qualification retains an anxiety that appears to contrast with Abraham's final scenario, de Silentio points out that everything of existential significance occurs before the angel appears and delivers the counter-order. Abraham was fully prepared to give up Isaac and fully invested in receiving him back, ahead of time, no holds barred. This overriding love is what renders him heroic from the beginning and what he brings back with him down the mountain. No doubt, the requirement of actual marriage *in order to be* considered a legitimate bachelor is puzzling, as if the sacred bond could somehow play second fiddle to a more elegantly strung separation. But as with Abraham, the issue lies before and beyond the literal externals and within the very real inner life of the moral agent. The recognizable conventions surrounding how our personal loves are embodied and enacted are not thereby irrelevant or even straightforwardly canceled. Rather, these are the outer forms that provide the dramatic setting for a complex internal struggle (Kierkegaard, 1983: 37–53).

The hermeneutical question raised by the hypothetical individual William imagines is whether it spells the height of romance or a pathetic anomaly. The Judge can barely conceive how one could either glean from or forge out of such suffering any larger significance. For his part, the tormenting possibility he conjures only serves to confirm his own "conviction of the happiness of marriage" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 183). More modestly, he concludes it would indeed take extraordinary faith "to believe that God

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could intervene [*gribe ind*] in life this way" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 181). It makes one wonder whether being captain of the popinjay-shooting club is an earnest example of incarnate agency or an ironic witticism. From behind the text, Kierkegaard himself seems to imply both.

Just below the surface of William's reflections is a premonition that, married or not, a finely cultured, bourgeois existence may be just as unromantic as it is irreligious, just as loveless as it is impious, a conjoined cultural commentary that runs through *Stages* from bow to stern. Before turning to the diarist, our central romantic hero, we can already detect a link between the two in that, quite possibly, it will be an unhappy love that is supremely – painfully, passionately, exquisitely – meaningful. This possibility emerges from within William's own account. At bottom, the happiness of love comes down to an aesthetic judgment, but an aesthetic judgment that is itself interwoven with religious longing and provision. Taken solely in terms of what the Judge endorses for himself, he can be charged with seeking a kind of pleasure. But unlike the pagan connoisseurs he finds so distasteful, his happiness consists in decidedly bourgeois pleasures, the well-bred and modest comforts of practical order and emotional stability, all neatly dressed in church-going respectability. Hopefully, he is married to someone like himself in this regard. But when the banqueteers spy William and his wife having tea after smashing their own wine glasses, they are above all riveted by how wholesome, yet terribly boring such staid domesticity appears. Where is the excitement, the storm and stress, the restless longing, the harrowing guilt, melancholy, or heartbreak? Perhaps the Judge will encounter all this and more if one of his children dies, God forbid. Not that one would expect *that* kind of thought from the tipsy bachelors; they are too civilized, too well-bred, too "aesthetic" themselves to brandish such thoughts. The diarist, we shall see, is another matter. For him, God may very well "intervene" in some such way and occasion any manner of providential distress.

What we encounter in *Stages*, then, is a kind of cloven aesthetic and correspondingly, sundered piety, and, therefore, a befittingly split ethic. The unsettling result is paradigmatically Romantic. With Dimitri Karamazov, Kierkegaard could very well have declaimed:

> Beauty is a terrifying thing! It's so frightening because it's undefinable, and it's indefinable because God has surrounded us with nothing but riddles. Here the shores of a river meet, incompatibilities coexist. So terribly many mysteries! Solve them if you can without getting your feet wet. It's beautiful, isn't it? What I really can't bear, though, is that a man of a noble heart and a superior intelligence may start out from

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> the ideal of the Madonna and end with the ideal of Sodom. It is even more awful for someone who already has the ideal of Sodom in his soul does not renounce the ideal of the Madonna either, which still sets his heart ablaze, as in his younger, blameless years. Yes sir, a man's range of feelings is wide, too wide even, and if I had my way, I'd narrow it down a bit (Dostoevsky, 1970: 140).

The way Hegel puts it, while pure evil is "in itself, dull and flat," romantic art stretches what "may be held together and endured by the imagination" (Hegel, 1975: I 222). With so spectacularly passionate and flawed an individual character, Kierkegaard puts this to the test in "Guilty"/"Not Guilty?"

4 The Irregular Declension

Subtitled "A Story of Suffering" the diary is penned by one desperately in love. We know this didn't happen overnight, since the two were acquainted a year prior to his seeing her "for the first time with a resolute soul" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 196). But the diary is short on whatever forces of attraction came into play. She is young, beautiful, and has taken up singing lessons. Interpersonal characteristics surface as the story unfolds. As far as romantic set-ups go, the diarist simply conveys the following about her "life situation."

> Her father is a serious man, and the mother's death has mollified his nature and diffused a friendliness that certainly has something sad about it but also something open and inviting. Cheerfulness is not turned away from this place, but neither is happiness sought outside or in the prolix company of every Tom, Dick, and Harry. The mother's death has helped the children to draw closer together more earnestly and to center their thoughts on their home, where the father, not without sadness but all the more solicitously, protects his children and not ungraciously lets himself be rejuvenated by the legitimate demands of the young people upon life (Kierkegaard, 1988: 207).

This is not a connoisseur's list of qualifications, but it does provide a vivid snapshot of the kind of environment that would not only render *her* ready and capable of love but also suggests the way in which the two of them are fundamentally well-suited for one another, since it would be impossible to imagine the diarist enamored of an unmollified extrovert. Naturally, none of this is an explanation of his love, nor is it meant to be. As we know from both the Young Man and Judge William, the love itself is an immediate and inexplicable presupposition without which nothing that follows would make sense. "I was as much in love as anyone,

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even though not many would understand that I, if my deliberation had not allowed me this step, would have kept my falling in love to myself" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 195).

Any great love begins in the twilight of an uncalculated and risky preoccupation out of which one involuntarily ventures a reciprocal response. Such a venture includes taking responsibility for a dramatic disclosure that renders the beloved equally and correspondingly responsible. What few would "understand" about this is how our most salient personal loves simply erupt in this fashion, so long as we allow them, invariably starting off with our initially admitting them. One could say that we need not admit anything so tenuous, however overwhelming it seems. But this would be to accept the corresponding risk of a buried talent. The diarist is too self-respecting, too open, too emotionally intelligent, too romantic, to take this sagacious route (Kierkegaard, 1995: 12). It is truly all or nothing. He is not comparatively looking around for someone more suitable, or worse, someone more worthy. "I marry her or I do not marry at all" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 195).

Although love is the presupposition, the ensuing tale is about the obstacles that threaten its happiness. We find out soon enough this is not a case of unrequited love; nor are they separated by a wicked stepmother or geographical divide. Almost immediately following his pressing declaration, she welcomes his proposal with no apparent reservation. The declaration itself occurs while the two inadvertently found themselves precipitously alone in a corridor – during which he "shivered inwardly" and she "trembled visibly." Then:

> The first kiss—what bliss! A girl with a joyful temperament, happy in her youth! And she is mine. What are all dark thoughts and fancies but a cobweb, and what is depression but a fog that flies before this actuality, a sickness that is healed and is being healed by the sight of this health, this health that, after all, is mine since it is hers, is my life and my future. Riches she does not have; this I know, I know it very well; nor is it necessary either, but she can say, as an apostle said to the paralytic, "Silver and gold I do not have, but what I have I give you; stand up, be well." If yesterday I became ten years older, today I became ten years younger (Kierkegaard, 1988: 211).

Naturally, what lay behind her acceptance is shrouded in as much mystery as what prompted his declaration in the first place. Should we assume she was dimly aware of and joyfully awakened by the inexplicable attention of this ethically fragile, religiously poised, socially enclosed, deliberately imaginative, erotically reserved, easily bored, bookish idealist?

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Should we also assume she was not entirely prepared to share his terrible need to cull an eternal significance from every dark possibility and comic turn of earthly fortune? Yes, again, or nothing further would make much sense.

Keeping with language already used by Judge William as he reflects on a possible "legitimate exception" to the rule of marriage, the diarist repeatedly refers to certain inner "anomalies" under the heading of "depression" [*tungsind*: lit. heavy minded] that stand in the way of the steps he has taken, obstacles that render him, as we have just read, somewhat paralytic. This "depression" is the great burden he carries, that he longs to lay down, is very reticent to disclose, and otherwise desperately tries to manage, circumscribe, and accept. The reader can even helpfully think of the diary as an indirect, decidedly literary attempt to do any, all, or some combination of these. The romantic heroism of that (un)disclosure lay in just how difficult and heart-wrenching the task is, a task all the more salient considering the great healing that is love when it happens – when we find it, come to see how terribly we rely on it, and helplessly desire to be worthy of it. "With all the heroes who hover in my imagination, it is indeed more or less the case that they carry a deep and secret sorrow that they are unable or unwilling to confide to anyone" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 197). When both Victor Eremita and Judge William say there is nothing "simple" about marriage, they each have a complexity in mind befitting their own manner and outlook. The corresponding awareness on the part of the diarist is downright harrowing.

"Depression" itself is no simple thing, starting with the fact that it is not only or even primarily debilitating. Often categorized as an illness, which the diarist himself is prone to do, it is also thoroughly dialectical. The kind of negative, even hateful self-awareness it often engenders bespeaks a range and depth of self-knowledge one can only accurately describe as Delphic. It also vacillates in respect to moral agency. Clearly, the diarist does not choose to be the way he is, but equally clear is how responsible he is for its various inflections. Proverbially put, grief will either soften or harden the heart, and there's no helping it. With appropriate nuance, near the end of the diary he says the "seat" of this sickness lay "in the power of the imagination, and possibility is its nourishment" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 391). In the same passage, he describes the two-fold suffering of having a deformity that also renders him guilty. So far is the diarist from thinking of depression as a disabling mood one can safely mask by interrupting the reabsorption of serotonin, we would probably do well to revert to the older term melancholia in translating *tungsind*.

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The phenomenon, as old as philosophy itself, assumes an integrated structure of self-conscious and somatic capacities. More vitally still, it assumes an undelimited understanding of health that eludes not only physiological symptomatology but pathological diagnosis in the first place. Virtually every topic of discussion within the diary follows from, stands behind, or is related to what is clearly a hermeneutic understanding of "depression" that belongs to a "universe of meaning and discourse that, while based on the humoral theory and often discussed in relation to melancholia the disease, has its own standing, a life of its own" (Jackson, 1981: 99). The various entries unfold a web-like structure that continuously alludes to short of explaining, and haltingly explains short of justifying its author. That web mirrors the condition in which the diary was itself discovered: submerged at the bottom of a pond with the key locked inside. "Not even what I am writing here is my innermost meaning. I cannot entrust myself to paper in that way, even though I see it in what is written" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 386). The diarist thus revealingly conceals his own blend of the "dulled, fear-ridden, sorrowful melancholic who is ill and the intelligent, profound, witty, and often inspired melancholic who is blessed with a superior temperament" (Jackson, 1981: 100).

Judge William's notion of a legitimate exception who suffers for it already invokes a classical understanding of the melancholic as one who stands out in some extraordinary, tragically heroic manner. Among those who share this "atrabilious temperament" Aristotle includes eminent poets, philosophers, and statesmen who provide some particularly moving, insightful, or disturbing gloss on our human plight (Földényi, 2016: 8). They are those especially attuned to see the joys of finite, created existence as deeply intertwined with its agonies and thus take up the task of human life with a certain refined and sensitive irony that is at the same time frequently despondent and inconsolable. Not that the initiates of such moonless mysteries think of themselves in superlative terms. They are more likely to feel haunted by spiritual infinitudes and even condemned to their inaccessible interiors (Ibid: 89–90). In this regard, the diarist describes himself as anything but a paradigm:

> With a fair degree of accuracy, I give the temperature of every mood and passion, and when I am generating my own inwardness, I understand these words: *homo sum, nil humani a me alienum puto* [I am a human being, I hold that nothing human is alien to me]. But humanly no one can model himself on me, and historically I am even less a prototype for any human being. If anything, I am someone who could be needed in a crisis, a guinea pig that life uses to feel its way (Kierkegaard, 1988: 365).

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This abnormal, exceptional sense of fellow feeling is of course accentuated by his being in love. As a heightened instance of human flourishing (the highest *telos*), the courtship of the two is precisely and paradoxically what brings him to think they should call the engagement off. He obviously identifies with her and wishes above all for her happiness. But since the scale and range of his makeup exceeds what it takes to be an ordinarily sociable, well-adjusted spouse, he inevitably comes to suspect he would only stand in the way of the daily warmth and well-being his beloved undoubtedly deserves. She does not see it this way and resists separation as though pleading for her life. This misunderstanding between the two is precisely what readers must make sense of, starting with how diminutive the term "misunderstanding" makes it sound. There is an immensity in play here, an entire latticework of meaning larger than both of them, but in which each are contingently interlaid, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health. Helpless devotion and proud self-esteem vie with one another, as they do for any two lovers. In the case of the diarist, that familiar dynamic at once drives him toward her, then away, and all the while into the hands of a living God. From what we can tell, she nobly holds her own and responds in kind, though he understandably distrusts the happiness she expresses as she gets to know him.

The diarist largely assumes, if fully initiated, she could only love him out of pity. His "secret" is that he is repellent, but not pitiable. In short, he is both loveable and unlovable at the same time, as a whole, an entire self. No wonder he is so reticent to share it. For is this not *the* human secret – the impossible, disgusting, embarrassing, a-logical truth of the matter? (a) Who of us can claim to fully, responsibly, understand this truth in all its disarming incongruity, and (b) therefore justifiably claim to actually, knowingly be in love under that condition? Far more plausible, far more psychologically realistic, would be some sham, hybrid form of feeling with which we essentially gloss over, embellish – or most unromantically of all – carefully avert our eyes, dutifully sticking by the beloved (Kierkegaard, 1988: 311–15). Naturally, the diarist finds these perfectly reasonable possibilities part and parcel of the deeply depressing human predicament, and in his case, cannot help but find her "innocent lovableness" additionally troubling: "I am most unhappy when she is most beautiful" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 221).

> If she were unhappy, it would help. But this childlike happiness, this buoyancy in the world, which I cannot understand and with which I cannot deeply and essentially sympathize (because my sympathy for it is through sadness, which indicates precisely the contradiction)—and

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> my battle, my courage (to say something positive about myself), my buoyancy in dancing over abysses of which she has no idea whatsoever and with which she can sympathize only unessentially, as with a dreadful story one reads and whose actuality one cannot conceive, that is, through the imagination—what will come of this? (Kierkegaard, 1988: 222).

And so, eventually, he calls the engagement off. She beseeches him in the name of God and his deceased mother. For his part, he painfully relinquishes without giving up.

In fact, his melancholy secret is not so straightforward. For on the very same page he writes:

> Might it be possible, might my whole attitude to life be askew, might I have run into something here in which secretiveness is forbidden? I do not understand it. I who have become a master in my art, I who—alas, I do confess it—proudly ranked myself with the heroes I found in the poets' writings because I knew I could do what was said of them, I who for her sake and the sake of the relationship had just brought this to perfection! (Ibid).

The very unhappiness of his attraction to her is itself a source of guilt; and the social artistry with which he conceals his highly questionable self-respect is a further source of shame. Indeed, his "whole attitude" does seem askew – or quite "possibly" – cannot bear the scrutiny of a "third party" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 223). How could we adjudicate? More than one reader has been tempted, were it possible, to crush him until decent good cheer bled from every pour of his arrogant sadness. Ironically, the diarist writes as if God were using her to do exactly that (Kierkegaard, 1988: 225). Tears spring from his eyes as he reads aloud some sermon; meanwhile, she is "silent, quiet, but entirely calm" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 222). When others are present "she is as cheerful as ever" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 226).

The ambiguity of third-party perspective is a major theme of the diary; various gestures, moods, or exchanges, and his reports about them remain deeply significant and meaningful, but not in a way that can be seamlessly spelled out. These are formal indications that suggest how an objective uncertainty is the overall condition for the possibilities of faith, hope, and especially love. The division of the diary into morning and midnight passages itself speaks to how differently we handle things depending on the time of day. This axial sense of time is conjoined with an orbital one, as midnight passages recount the present while the morning entries recall events of the year past. This ongoing, melancholy pattern conveys

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a temporal distension in which future possibilities keep approaching from out of an increasingly weighted background. "My hope is like an overcrowded lifeboat on a stormy sea" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 328). Bleak though the prospect is, the two of them may yet come together before some unforeseen hearth, "for the task of recollecting in the morning hours and the rescue attempt at midnight do, after all, constitute a kind of embrace in which she is enclosed" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 263).

What is perhaps quintessentially Romantic about the diarist is the insistence with which he assumes the ideals of his inner life cannot be translated into anything like a public form. To be sure, from a realistic-ethical point of view, his standards of transparency, mutuality, and genuine feeling will always be judged as too high, even inhumane. Of course this inhumane prospect is also something he worries about, something that suspends him in awkward motions of concrete faithfulness, for from the point of view of public sensibility, from the perspective of a more modest pluralism of affect, such incommunicable depth of character is barely distinguishable from a criminally deliberate delicacy of mood. The very way he has been "fearfully and wonderfully made" compel him to appear a seducer.

Picturing the diarist himself, a third person report might be clear enough: "a depraved man who in the intoxication of new sins has promptly forgotten the girl and the relationship" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 224). Undoubtedly, no one who knew him would say this; but what exactly could they say? In this regard, the February 17 *midnight* passage is especially illuminating. The diarist presents, by way of "objectivity," a stylized characterization of the two parties involved, as if composed for the imagination. For him, the expressed purpose of eliciting such a third person point of view is "to drain off the almost comic aspect of the affair," and having shed that foolishness, render himself prepared "to drag and lift tragically that same affair as a burden." For readers, it helps us see more patently what is at stake.

> Here is the report. It is a young girl who, in other respects fortunately endowed with feminine charms, lacks one thing: religious presuppositions. Religiously she is just about at the following level (a level that presumably is seldom recorded by the pastor is the official record, for she certainly can recite her catechism)—for her God is very much like what one pictures as a kind elderly uncle who for a sweet word does everything the child wants, just as the child wants it. That is why one is so very fond of this uncle. One also has a certain unexplainable awe of God that does not become anything more. When one is sitting devoutly in church, it makes a lovely sight. But resignation, infinite resignation, the relationship of spirit, the absolute relationship of spirit with

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> spirit—there is no thought of that. This girl takes up the religious and talks about it nonchalantly. And just as the youthful temperament as a rule presumptuously says the first thing that comes to mind, which is precisely a feminine charm, she does this with religion as well. She loves a person more than she loves God. She swears by God, she beseeches in God's name, and yet with regard to the religious she is only romantic in the little multiplication table, and with regard to the religious she is, *valore intrinseco* [according to intrinsic value], only an ordinary dollar (Kierkegaard, 1988: 236–7).

> [He] is just the opposite, he is religiously constructed; his romanticism has the magnitude of infinity, in which God is a powerful God, and seventy years a stroke of the pen, and a whole life on earth a period of probation, and the loss of this one and only desire is something for which one must be prepared if one wishes to be involved with him, because as the eternal he has a round concept of time, and says to the one who seeks him, "No, the moment hasn't come yet—just wait a bit." "How long?" "Well—seventy years." "My God, meanwhile, a person could die ten times!" "That must certainly be left up to me, without whose will not one sparrow falls to the ground, so then—tomorrow, tomorrow very early." In other words, in seventy years, for since a thousand years for him is as one day, so seventy years is precisely one hour, forty-six minutes, and three seconds. This is how the opposite is constituted. He thinks the task in relation to this is not to be angry with God because he is great but is to bear in mind that he himself is of low degree, is not to wrangle with God because he is eternal, for this, after all, was never a fault, but is to bear in mind that he, admittedly a miserable entity in the temporal, is nothing, that the task is to endure, not to disturb for himself the only love that is happy, not to forfeit the only admiration that is blessed, not to lose out on the only expectation that endures, since the task, after all, is to endure (Kierkegaard, 1988: 237).

So contrasted, note that both characters display a romanticism of spirit. Both are quite humanly in love and want "to be with one another," as we say. We cannot dwell on this long enough. Without it, there is no story, tragic, comic, or otherwise. Let us first, then, review the hallmarks of being in love: In love, one rises above quotidian existence, and a completely new peripheral capacity makes the whole spectrum of actuality – the natural world, the world of ideas, and the persons who unify those worlds by inhabiting both – fulgurate with unprecedented significance. Just as surely, the tenebrous shadows of meaninglessness grow deeper with each inexhaustibly unique feeling, texture, and resonance. The built world of culture, of art and architecture, institutions of one sort and another, fill one with a homesick sense of ruin. In the presence of that one beloved, chains fall away, doors open, and just as unexpectedly, fathomless expanses stretch out above and below. Both a reckless

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joy and a presentiment of unworthiness take the heart by storm in turns. A veil is lifted, and a timeless horizon suddenly appears on which all the dead who have ever lived stand as witnesses to the validity of this singular, indomitable prehension. As might be clear from this description, any two, actual romantics can differ dramatically, and be lighter or darker, respectively, in mood and outlook.

The diarist opposingly inflects this possible difference on a theological plane. But to contrast the two by suggesting she lacks "religious presuppositions" altogether is both deliberately provocative and potentially misleading. For one thing, a secular, disenchanted, and typically pessimistic romanticism is a specific, adjacent development. Such "romantics" have usually discarded a credulous belief in the power of love and any decidedly benevolent creator-God who underwrites it. Setting aside whether Schopenhauer *et al*. should be considered romantic in the first place, for present hermeneutical purposes, we can trace "her" theology in an original line to Schleiermacher's *Christmas Eve Celebration*: *A Dialogue* (inspired in part by Schleiermacher's own experience of unhappy love for Eleanore Grunow). It portrays a bourgeois gathering that features the gifts, music, and familial conversation of a husband, wife, their eleven-year-old daughter, and a handful of friends, including an expectant mother. The entire scenario is an occasion to encapsulate the spirit of Christianity. The natural love and joy of Mary and the human birth of the Christ child together emerge as the central site of divine activity to which all other events, sacred and secular alike, inevitably refer. Baptism, confirmation, Holy Week, ordinary birthdays, New Years, marriage, and death itself, all derive their fundamental significance from the singular wonder of the Incarnation. Even the explicitly theological speeches of the men at the party fall especially silent under the enchanting star of this silent night.

The heart and soul of Schleiermacher's dialogical masterpiece is the eleven-year-old Sophie. She is a truly natural born Christian who, under persistent questioning by the young lawyer and rationalist Leonhardt, cannot definitively say whether she would rather be happy or sad. Between her ingeniously contrived panorama of tiny figurines and precocious musicality she does indeed seem to form a unity of "holy earnestness and blithesome play" (Schleiermacher, 2010: 42). Tellingly, one of the reasons her presence causes Leonhardt such trepidation is the way in which her bourgeoning melancholy just might land her in a Moravian sister's home. In this regard, it bodes only somewhat well that Sophie's slightly older,

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newly engaged role model Friederike also happens to be partial to verses by Novalis. Even so, the ideas and feelings of the overall picture is rich with domestic warmth and cultural promise in a way that *would* tempt someone like Karl Barth to describe its view of God's relation to the world as "a kind elderly uncle who for a sweet word does everything the child wants, just as the child wants it." But the fully incarnational theological tradition to which it belongs simply articulates the more immediate, immanent side of religion, apart from which there would be nothing to baptize. We can well imagine Judge William heartily endorsing its content, and the young woman with whom the diarist is in love piously attending the morning service under the charming auspices of its mood.

In contrast, the theological strain to which "he" belongs revolves around the *mysterium tremendum* that is also near the heart of any piety worthy of the name (Otto, 1923: 14ff). Under this heading, the eternal, transcendent, "wholly other" nature of divine things interrupts and even shatters the "feel" of worldly existence. An encounter with the Holy One leaves us fearful and disconcerted. In ethical terms, even God's *love* can scald our pride and make one weep in shame. The experience the diarist has in mind is the kind of sorrow and resignation we are called upon to endure because the earthly terms of *eudaimonia* prove disquietingly inadequate, falling so desperately short of our truest longing. The watchword of this spiritual tradition is idolatry, if by idolatrous we mean those perfectly legitimate passions with which our search for the spiritual beatitude of human wholeness drives us this way and that. The diarist has apparently read *Fear and Trembling*, since the scenario he has in mind is when a great love must be sacrificially deferred. He even puts this, as does Johannes de Silentio, in terms of time – that for God seventy years is but a stroke of the pen, a harrowing thought. Our temporal embodiment is indeed both the condition for the possibility of human happiness and the backdrop of its failure. A spirituality permeated by a sense of eternity will thus experience earthly life as paradoxically full of absence. A romanticism "with the magnitude of infinity" speaks to the vast and silent reaches of meaningless space that mars our finite loves. Are not our greatest expectations imbued with disheartening failures of emotion and will? Above all, a person so attuned is moved primarily by the implicit and deferred. At bottom, this sort of religious individual is especially prepared for loss (Freud, 1981: 243–58).

These two orientations are not incompatible. Arguably, we can only make sense of them dialectically. If without "her" immanent lares and

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penates there would be nothing to baptize, so without "his" Holy One there would be nothing other than mammon, the leveling of everything to a singular standard of profane worthlessness. Provocatively, the diarist brings out the "comic" side of the matter by comparing the mood and practice of incarnational piety to a pharisaical saloonkeeper, standing in church, talking with God, saying: "I am not like the other saloonkeepers, who give only the prescribed measure; I give generous measure, and in addition to that extra at the New Year." "He is not thereby a hypocrite," the diarist adds, "but is comic instead, since it is clear that he is not speaking with God but with himself *qua* saloonkeeper or with one of the other saloonkeepers" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 238). On the one hand, if all one has are wholly immediate, immanent, or "aesthetic" standards, then there is no such thing as spiritual superiority – not even in the case of fasting three times a week and paying a tithe of mint and cumin – but *only* the pretense of a "man who lay in the ditch and thought he was riding horseback" (Ibid). However, as soon as the diarist imagines applying this critique to *her*, his actual beloved, any pure notion of radical monotheism falls tragically apart:

> Why did I sweep her along out into the current with me, why did I make myself guilty of applying a standard to a girl's existence that only disturbs us both! Well, now, now it is too late. Even if everything turns out all right and she really does help herself out of her misery or never was so deeply immersed in it, for me the religious is so much the true meaning in life that it terrifies me if she is healed only in temporal categories. If one does not have this type of concern, it is easy enough to retire into empty, glittering glory, like a chosen one; but if my, if you like, high standard has disturbed her life, then she in turn holds me with her, if you please, lesser standard; she with her lesser standard is a mighty sovereign to me, because without her I am unable to complete any view of life, since through her I sympathize with every human being (Kierkegaard, 1988: 239).

The ambiguity of this passage suggests a third orientation beyond the stark either/or of a warm, youthful, domestic faith and the howling winds of earthly life understood as a brutal period of divine probation. Again, as if he had been reading *Fear and Trembling*, the diarist ruminates that "[w]hat will save her, as I thought at first and still do, is a certain healthiness of temporality" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 240).

> I am convinced that even in the most crucial moment, when I made the separation between us, she did not comprehend resignation. Either she believed: now I shall die and then it will be over, but that is no resignation; or she hoped altogether spontaneously, but that is not resignation;

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> or she picked herself up internally by virtue of her natural healthiness and was stimulated precisely now to take hold of temporality—but that is not resignation (Ibid).

Hovering in the background is the idealized case of Abraham, who de Silentio describes as both completely, knowingly, infinitely resigned, *and* faithfully confident he would receive his great love back. The diarist himself often writes as if he is lamely performing such dual movements:

> My God, every one of my nerves is probing, as it were, out in existence; they are feeling their way to see whether there would be some indication that we still might turn out to be suitable for each other, that until then I would have maintained the strength to keep my soul and my love at the peak of desire *per tot discrimina* [through so many perilous chances], and that she would have promptly found her bearings without looking to the right or to the left. What a tremendous reward for all my misery! If the whole thing were to be but a day, if my wedding day and the day of my death were to be the same, what overpayment for all my toil and trouble, for what I, regarding the matter from a comic angle, have given up outwardly and what I, tragically suffering, call the overtime work of a prisoner! Ineffable bliss! What are Romeo and Juliet compared with a victory through such perils, compared with the happiest outcome of the deepest despair! (Kierkegaard, 1988: 226–7).

However, unlike de Silentio's idealized portrait of Abraham, the diarist is overtaken by the doubts which haunt the double-movements of faith. In so doing, he lays his most revealingly romantic cards on the table.

> What if she could not persevere with me in the desert of expectancy, what if she longs for a more secure life in Egypt; or what if she married someone else! If she does, may God bless her marriage—after all, in a certain sense that is what I want, what I am working for. And yet at this point I have other thoughts on the matter. Do I then have more than one understanding; is this a sign of sagacity or insanity? Or what if she were totally unchanged, had suffered nothing either in soul or body, but she did not understand me, did not understand me entirely; what if the heart of the young girl's breast did not beat violently as it does in the breast of the faithless one, what if the blood of youth does not rush to her head as it does to mine; what if it coursed calmly in the inexperienced girl and not as it does in the cool soul of the sensible person; what if she did not understand my suffering and its degree, did not understand my chilling composure, the necessity for it; what if the word "forgiveness" between us were to be earnest, the earnestness of judgment, and not a ball we both hit in the game of erotic love while fidelity jubilated over its victory; what if she did not entirely understand that there is only one way to be zealots in our day and to preserve romance

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> of soul in the nineteenth century's risible commonsensibleness, and that is to be just as cool outwardly as one is warm inwardly; what if she did not understand, did not entirely understand, that it is infamous to help by half measures and that it is being faithful to reject illusory relief; what if, when the hint came from heaven, the sign for our happiness, what if she were out of step and could not follow it—what then, what then, what then? (Kierkegaard, 1988: 227–8).

This passage urgently conveys how the issue between them is not somehow simply a matter of deciding whether or not they can be together. True, he keeps intimating a break-up, though it is not something he wants; nor is it a matter of saving her from him in some external way, as if he had simply intruded upon a life that would have gone on to flourish with more spiritual promise without him in the first place. The diarist certainly entertains this thought, but that is only one of the more extreme expressions of his ongoing melancholy doubt. It is not only that he cannot know she would be better off without him. Indeed, to erase himself from her history would be to eliminate the condition for the possibility of their love altogether, and this he cannot consistently do and yet remain himself. He admits that were she to "move on," and in one sense set him free, he would just have to start the whole spiritual task all over again. As a matter of fact, he would not be starting over but simply contending with a fresh set of possibilities. And no doubt the same would be true of her. Positively put, this passage clearly indicates the kind of romanticism *Stages* especially seeks to exhibit: the darkly earnest ethical passion that knits soul to soul with a bond unattenuated by nicer norms. With an uncommonly pure and problematic passion does he unbearably long to be her equal in conquering human failure and rising above our terrible finitude.

The midnight entry of June 14 existentially covers earlier ground after an additional passage of time. Revisiting "her circumstances and the family's individuality" the diarist comes to see the same things he has dimly realized all along in a different light. At the time (a year and a half ago), he thought that getting involved would simply require he discreetly manage his darker side and that he could indeed do this, not only for her sake but his own, in order that they might build a life together, without necessarily including each and every one of his thoughts and feelings. Is it really a condition of a genuine communion to incorporate the *entire* portfolio of one's inner life into the wedded state? Surely our emotional interiors contain many an unlit alcove, many an imposing sculpture obscure even to ourselves. Initially, he apparently felt this was indeed unnecessary, and

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even felt confident he could pull it off. But it turns out, "behold, I am shipwrecked precisely on that, not in such a way that I cannot do it, but in such a way that this proves not to be the task" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 373).

> After that little incident [*Begivenhed*], her devotion [*Hengivenhed*] becomes more and more reckless in its expression and demonstrates to me precisely that my inclosing reserve is an absolute misrelation, that her relationship with me will become a misalliance for her, even if she does not understand it …. If I have taken fifteen years to form a view of life for myself and to mature in it, a view of life that both inspired me and was altogether compatible with my nature, I cannot suddenly be altered in this way. Indeed, I cannot even tell her that I wished it, because such a wish is a thoroughly indefinite stipulation, and it would be very irresponsible to use it to have her life at one's disposal. Insofar as she has struggled with all her might to show her devotion, she has worked against herself with all her vitality (Kierkegaard, 1988: 373–4).

Presumably, the "little incident" refers to April 20 when she sat him down on a chair, backed away a few steps, then came up, and fell on her knees. "No doubt there was a bit of flirtatiousness in it, but essentially there was sadness, and then a kind of bliss – yes, I may call it a demented bliss at having found a right expression for her passion" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 312). This seems to reveal that he cannot simply attempt to meet her where she is at with a carefully trimmed version of his outlook and inscape; and he cannot do so because she has already brought and begun expressing a particularly vulnerable, open, and unfinished version of herself to their union in a way that seems recklessly oblivious to its potential impiety. Moving forward, his darkest fear and trembling would inevitably (have to) come out as the truly tandem element of a reciprocal love most deeply felt. This is the very lesson her dauntless but discombobulated devotion teaches him.

Without necessarily leading his reader as a witness for the prosecution, the diarist repeatedly expresses his anxiety that her love appears "based" on a lack of information (which he is obviously reserved about). But all of us lack information from beginning to end. Individual subjectivity constitutively gravitates away from full transparency. Is there something special about his secret that makes him somehow more like a seducer than the rest of us, somehow more like one who deliberately dresses up their vain pathologies in order to elicit sympathetic fascination? Are not the chiaroscuros of our inner selves a significant element of what attracts us to one another in the first place? Indeed, she falls on her knees before him in a way that seems simultaneously happy and sad. Surely in her

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"demented bliss" she both knows and doesn't know him. But there is no obvious reason to suppose she is patently deceived or naively ignorant. This startingly realistic prospect perhaps disarms him, as far as we can tell, only because his own inner train of thought – his brand of reflection – is *differently but correspondingly ambiguous*. For instance, he "hunts for the terrifying in all directions" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 374). "Although I have the most inspired conception of God's love, I also have the conception that he is not an old fussbudget who sits in heaven and humors us, but that in time and temporality one must be prepared to suffer everything" (Ibid). "If she had become mine, I am sure that on the wedding day I would stand beside her with the thought that one of us would die before evening" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 375). Presumably, she does not hunt in such a manner; she may not experience the need to. Perhaps for her, the "terrifying" already walks the streets of Copenhagen in more ordinary but not for that reason more benign ways. Perhaps her very (bourgeois) singing lessons are her way of whistling in the dark. To be sure, what he reveals to us, as unwonted reader-confessors, can sound alarming:

> From the very first time I saw her, during all the time she was my preoccupation in the form of hope, I have been able to imagine her dead without losing my composure. I would have felt pain, perhaps all my life, but the eternal would promptly have been present, and for me the eternal is supreme. Only in this way can I understand that one loves another. In the consciousness of the eternal, in infinity, each of the partners is free, and both of them have this freedom while they love each other (Kierkegaard, 1988: 320).

But we have good reason to suppose that, in her own mollified way, she too cherishes the hold he has on her, knowing full well just how fragile is our earthly lot.

As a whole, *Stages on Life's Way* lays out the various antinomies of personal love. Such antinomies are indicative of human existence more broadly, from which meaning must be wrested and through which that meaning is felt. In addition to those antinomies brought up and addressed, first by the tipsy banqueteers and then by the sober Judge William, the main antinomy on the diarist's mind is the ineluctable part we play in each other's faith, hope, or love. His need to take responsibility is indeed dialectical in that while he does not do anything specific to jeopardize her own quest, he is obviously involved. Everything he does, says, and feels shapes her own trajectory. There is no way around this. All this speaks to the dramatic realism of Kierkegaard's text when it comes to the interpersonal nature of spiritual development. On the one hand, flourishing

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as an individual, responsible, self-related *me*, quite apart from another, continues unabated. But as with every other temporally embodied pole of selfhood, that self-relation is invariably caught up with and by others. I might develop in a certain direction or even retreat from myself as a result of something the other does or says or otherwise introduces into the orbit of *my* self. Especially when in love, the other is always more than an occasion but less than a determinate cause. Falling out of love, a certain degree of independence may be regained, though we probably never recover a previously unaffected present sense of selfhood. Having fallen hard, we are generally responsive in a way that virtually dissolves the difference between cause and occasion.

To have opened oneself to the wonder and immediacy of love, to have nurtured that possibility, and then to have ventured and declared it, and invited another to join the dance, all without truly considering whether taking such steps will only "weaken and destroy" a beloved by initiating them into one's own problematic inner world, is a grave crime, high treason against our noblest sensibilities (Kierkegaard, 1988: 197). A person cannot really back out without damaging the other's courage and self-esteem, without undermining their sense of meaning and hope for the future, their "youthful," "beautiful," "indescribable," even "enormous claims upon life" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 221, 226, 243). The heartbreak in question is not simply or solely the result of an "erotic" rejection, though leaving off the corporeal electricity of one's company is inevitably felt throughout. Rather, the bleeding follows upon a unnerving lack of faith in another's appreciative capacities, a painful disbelief in their graded ability to understand and take delight in a fellow soul most fragile and proud. The diarist will thus have sown the seeds of confusion, mistrust, and unbelief. Nevertheless, the "idea" he carries within himself – that our essential human task is to hold firmly to a great love while simultaneously imagining the worst – is not something one can ever, with confidence and authority, impart to someone else. We will always be both guilty and not guilty of spiritually intruding (Kierkegaard, 1988: 340–2).

On the one hand, we clearly have a responsibility to help those we love. And yet a hyper-vigilant, tragic sense of life may very well crush the beloved's spirit, leave them out there upon the deep, more or less stranded. And so, the witness of our lives should remain indirect, more or less silent, "closehanded," or certainly reserved (Kierkegaard, 1988: 343). At moments, the diarist has certainly "wished to the point of despair to be able to be everything to her, until in pain I learned that it is infinitely higher to be nothing at all" (Ibid). "A person can teach language, the arts,

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manual skills, etc., to another, but ethically-religiously one cannot essentially benefit another" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 344). With this thought in mind, could he ever be genuinely married? One of the dangers, perhaps the chief threat any great love faces, is the poor handling of this very prospect. Hence the double-binds Kierkegaard appears relentlessly bent on emphasizing throughout his authorship. In short, faithfulness to his "idea" can either join or drive a wedge between them. But which will it be?

The diarist markedly desires to realize, within the environs of ordinary existence, the fullest possible meaning of human life. But he suspects this is a recipe for idolatry, bordering on the complacency of a cozy, bourgeois, merely "aesthetic" existence (Kierkegaard, 1988: 379–80). What does it take to truly pledge oneself to another eternally, to render one's wish equal to the wonder of falling in love? Well, if it is not going to be idolatrous, a divine counter-order must continually attend the commitment. Ongoing renunciation renders the union holy. But this is severely at odds with the regular movements of love itself. Unparadoxically, what "normally" intervenes in life is not a divine counter-order, but a waning of immediacy, a leveling of passion. For the diarist, it goes otherwise. He finds meaning and comfort in a particular kind of suffering, a particular longing mixed with resignation:

> When the storm rages in the night and in the hungry howling of the wolves sounds forebodingly, when someone in distress at sea has saved himself on a plank—that is, has to be rescued by a straw from certain ruin, and consequently one cannot send a message to the next cottage because no one dares to venture out into the night, and thus one can save one's shouts: then one learns to be content with something other than confidence in night watchmen and policemen and the efficacy of distress signals (Kierkegaard, 1988: 379).

The danger here is a life restricted to the well-socialized company around the parish pump. If one does not take care, the proceeds of a person's life might add up only to the following:

> He was young and still remembers many enjoyable impressions from that time, many happy days; then he was married, and everything went well, except that he once became very ill, and a physician, the first one available, was hastily summoned, and so Professor D. came and proved to be a very careful physician, and thus became the family physician; also in Pastor P. he found an earnest spiritual counselor, of whose deep religiousness and sincerity he was more convinced than of his own religiousness and therefore he became fonder of him year after year. Then he became acquainted with many congenial families, associated with them, and then he died (Kierkegaard, 1988: 379).

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Conceivably, much here could very well be beautiful and gratifying enough. Still, the diarist intimates, "if this is supposed to be the ultimate when all is said and done – then I would rather not have inconvenienced either the professor or the pastor but would rather have heard the howling of the wolves and learned to know God" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 380). Meaning in life may not require the exposed and unpopulated backdrop overstretching the cliffs of Dover, but the latter do evince the interior geography the diarist especially seeks to lay bare. A redolent romanticism resurfaces, and the tragically articulated bond between Lear and Cordelia is once again evoked (Kierkegaard, 1988: 264). "We two alone will pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh at gilded butterflies, and hear poor rouges talk of court news, and take upon us the mystery of things, as if we were God's spies" (Shakespeare, 1943: 776). The antinomy is clear enough. What greater meaning could we have for one another than to be fellow witnesses of a grand and intricate spiritual haecceity?

The kernel of the diarist's exceptionalism, his romantic sin, is to take responsibility for the meaning of her life. There is nothing more self-aggrandizing than assuming their love is a matter of life or death. At times he wishes to return her to a time before they met, before it got to be a matter of life and death. But that the whole affair could somehow be compatible with a recovery in the form of relativizing its importance is something he can neither endorse nor accept. The prospect that she might forget about him by returning to a genuine first love appears like a kind of best case, least tragic scenario. His machinations on this point are a clear result of distinguishing himself from the grandiose pathology of Goethe's Werther, who rather shamelessly declares: "I worship myself ever since she loves me" (Goethe, 1989: 51). But *would* it be so noble to assume she neither could nor should find her love, and therefore his worth, all *that* significant? This is just one more in a long litany of inescapably melancholic apprehensions.

5 The Presentiment of a Life-View Not Given in Poetry

The "Letter to the Reader" from Frater Taciturnus is a sprawling piece of literary criticism, a clever attempt to overwhelmingly out-perform the most cultured of Golden Age literati. Its occasion, of course, is the diary Taciturnus himself penned. One might therefore expect a straightforward, insider's commentary of some sort. But along with romantic literature comes a tradition of romantic criticism. And in this case, we have a "letter" from a bemused ironist and cultural critic, a *poetice et eleganter*

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"street inspector" who negatively conjures his hero while exposing the poor aesthetic fashions of the day (Kierkegaard, 1988: 456, 470). The feedback Taciturnus offers is thus a twofold meditation, first on our ability to understand a certain kind of poetic-religious individual, and second, on his, or anyone's ostensive ability to imaginatively construct such a character in the first place. Though more recent aestheticians may not think in such terms, Kierkegaard clearly supposes our spiritual self-understanding and sense of authentic possibility is at least partially a function of our literary imagination. Hegel would certainly agree and correspondingly highlight the cultural role artists play, assuming there are visionary souls in a position to assume such a role, not to mention audience members sensitive enough to understand them.

As indirect proof of the existential significance of art, Taciturnus acknowledges how many readers would consider the diarist "a spook, troglodyte, or cave dweller" whose "conduct and fidelity are so grandiose, impractical, and awkward" it seems we can only pointlessly ask whether he became mad because of love or loves in such a way because he is mad (Kierkegaard, 1988: 400). Whether laughable or abhorrent, either way, the diarist can hardly be taken seriously. "Fortunately," Taciturnus wryly declares, "my hero does not exist outside my imaginary construction," and so we need not bother about him in any actual sense. Let him pass for the "enthusiast" he is and perhaps then we can modestly "become aware of something true in him and in much of what he says" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 403). Taciturnus thereupon launches into an extended reflection on the range of narrative options one might expect from a love story, the various obstacles associated with unhappy developments within that story, the appropriate kinds of questions a reader might ask of the characters involved, and ultimately, what point of view an author might wish to explore concerning life outside the text.

Throughout his analysis, the major point Taciturnus keeps circling back to is how, as artists or critics, we often do not look too directly at love itself, at how it actually works and what it entails. So much about it remains tacit and potentially misconstrued that, even by genre, whether a given tale is comic or tragic can only be very tenuously circumscribed. Taciturnus arrives at this point from several directions by making what appear to be vital distinctions, clear enough in themselves, but whose implications remain just beyond our grasp. For example, the familiar tales of unhappy love typically include obstacles "external" to the love itself. Petrarch and Laura, Abelard and Heloise, Romeo and Juliet: take away the fated circumstances of Laura's marriage, Heloise's cruel uncle,

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or Juliet's kin, then the lovers would be as happy as ever. In no uncertain terms, Taciturnus thinks this only shows how the *immediacy* of love is never questioned (Kierkegaard, 1988: 407). But oddly enough, this does not mean the average reader is likely to shed tears. More precisely, the "immediate" validity of love is indeed assumed but then also roundly dismissed, an "anomaly" on the part of the audience which itself could be "drawn into" the story and "brought to consciousness" in a potentially prescient manner. But as it is, "in our day," a poet has no "higher passion" toward which to direct our attention (Kierkegaard, 1988: 408).

We are led to believe Taciturnus offers his imaginary construction as an alternative tale, a story meant to move us in some revelatory way, by assuming the validity of a love that is "dialectical" in itself, replete with internal obstacles against which the lover struggles to maintain the joy, the plenitude, the full meaning of an immediate infinitude. What occurs in a love so rich in immediate validity is an equally mediated reflection that is "infinitely higher than immediacy, and in its immediacy relates itself to an idea" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 414). That idea, so enriched and overarching in itself, "signifies a God-relationship of the widest scope, and within this scope there is a multiplicity of more specific determinants" (Ibid). It seems Taciturnus is inching his way toward the conclusion that true love, any genuine article worthy of the name, would eventually betray the outlines of certain "double-movements" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 413–4). As elsewhere, this terminology echoes *Fear and Trembling*, where the courage of faith involves simultaneously resigning and holding fast to some great love. What such movements would look like, of course, is for the artist to portray. Wryly, Taciturnus the critic merely brings it up as a theme.

To bring out the "duplexity" in any authentic love, Taciturnus the artist has drawn his couple in a heterogeneous fashion, purportedly pushing his hero in a religious direction and letting his beloved remain in a kind of aesthetic immediacy (Kierkegaard, 1988: 420). Taken on their own, each is incomplete; he lacks the "first basis of the erotic," she the resignation through which "it can become clear she does not love herself" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 436). Presumably, in actuality, both of the characters, with their separable love for each other, would share in the duplexity. That is, individual lovers would fall on a spectrum: each would humbly and courageously, or anxiously and imperiously, and more or less awkwardly or elegantly make the relevant movements. Nevertheless, Taciturnus thinks it revealing to place his lovers at opposite ends: he with his melancholy zeal, she with her impetuous charm. This *does* seem to have the literary effect of bringing out "a multiplicity of more specific determinants" when the two

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are brought together. Between the lines an entire range of erotic tension imbued with pious reservation bares itself.

Here we might remind ourselves of the final comment Judge William makes about the "two" dangers that threaten marriage, one purely sensual, the other wholly spiritual. As if looking ahead to the diary, he says a couple who halved the dangers between themselves as individuals, in some peculiar division of labor, could no more form a happy pair than any other virgin and libertine (Kierkegaard, 1988: 100–1). Interestingly, William does not stereotype this comment in the way the banqueteers were comfortable talking about "women." Still, he does claim that a bride takes a much shorter existential detour on her way to the altar than does the groom. "Feminine romanticism is in the next moment the religious" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 167). Reversing this sentiment, the diarist writes as if his beloved lived primarily in aesthetic categories while he alone harbors religious presuppositions. Although reminiscent of essentialist stereotypes, the overall text does not come down on the matter. Like many nineteenth century romantics, Kierkegaard seems to think of human nature as a shared spectrum of possibilities, and may even assume erotic desire itself, in whatever configuration, is a postlapsarian nostalgia for an orginally androgynous naivete.

Stylistically, the uncanny distention between the morning and evening entries accentuates the interpersonal drama. Heavy with solitary rumination, emotional speculation, and agonizing self-interrogation, the hermeneutical task posed by the *midnight* entries is to glean something like a phenomenology of the self in love. For example, on May 21, the diarist compares being in love to prayer – an essentially silent, motionless, ineffectual posture of reverence that is nevertheless full of inwardly active, untranslatable meaning (Kierkegaard, 1988: 347–8). The *morning* entries contain the vivid external details of a relationship in progress, as it occurred, a year earlier. Alternating between morning and midnight echoes the interplay between experience and reflection characteristic of any historically embodied *mediation*. Taken together, the entries contain a synthesis of the sublime and ridiculous typical of romantic literature, from the tenderly breathless to the grotesquely humorous.

In this regard, the dramatic centerpiece of the diary is recounted on the morning of April 13. Evidently, in the course of his romantic preoccupations, the diarist had taken up fencing. No doubt ironically practicing certain inner acts of chivalry, one day his mask falls off and his sparring partner is unable to stop in time. There was some bleeding and "the application of a bit of bandage" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 300). That

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evening the diarist misses an appointment with his beloved; she hears an exaggerated story about the mishap, and in the morning, hurries over with her father in evident distress. The comic gravity of the situation strikes the particular chord the author wishes to express:

> She looked at me now and then in such a way that I understood she had something to tell me, but then I talked about the dangerous wound and about the oddity that it was a mask that had fallen off. Then she laughed, even though there was a tear in her eye. Then I said, "Yes, you may well laugh at me for being unmasked in that way." Then she said, "Oh, that's silly—you know very well what I mean." "Yes, that I should challenge him again and say: The whole thing doesn't count if the mask falls off" (Ibid).

As she leaves, he notes "a brash happiness in her walk" (Ibid). The entire scenario and their reactions to it suggest the particularly elastic manner in which one might incorporate danger into an everyday handling. The worst we can imagine need not harrow us beyond recourse. Knowing how much it matters, it may even take the form of an unheard-of gladdening as we joke about it. She seems to get this more than the diarist believes.

The repartee about the mask hearkens back to a dynamic between them that has clearly undergone significant development. Without chattering, he reports on February 12, she says one thing or another as it comes up.

> My reflection instantly seizes upon what she said, a little modification, and I have transferred it over into my sphere, and in this way the conversation goes by turns …. She finds satisfaction in expressing herself, and then is surprised to see her remarks as the object of so much attention; I understand some level of reflection, add to it, rejoice over her—and thus we are both gratified (Kierkegaard, 1988: 241).

We may well wonder *what* they talk about. In addition to the Bible and Shakespeare, has she also read Laertius' *Lives* or the poems of Ossian? Maybe. More likely, the content is the indirect sort lovers share whenever they talk of other things. We can thus accept his characterization of it as a kind of translation from a mundane to an elevated point of view. Indeed, one of the more tender and revealing things he says is, "I do actually seem to be discovering that I have some qualities that could make me into an excellent husband: I have a sense for insignificant matters; I have a memory for trifles; I have some talent in introducing a bit of meaning – all of which is very good over the passage of time" (Ibid). But we need not accept his worst fears about how little she comprehends. The quotes we have from her show she knows all too well what their

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conversations are about. "She declares that she does not care for me at all, that she had accepted me out of sympathy and could not at all understand what I wanted with her" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 267). "She says she has never felt happier than she does now" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 311). "She declares she would rather have all this than not see me" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 349). Then we have her direct quotes: "I believe you're mad" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 385). "I don't trust you an inch." "Let me cry; it is a relief" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 387). And finally, on July 7, she begs "think of me sometimes" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 395).

Taciturnus nimbly underlines how the diary blurs the line between the tragic and comic. For one thing, the two of them never finally separate. And yet they do not remain together. The final morning entry wherein she heartbreakingly asks that he think of her sometimes actually illustrates a parable he tells earlier. With "unusual cheerfulness" he said it was possible to do as she wished, and then came back at noon to announce it was over (Kierkegaard, 1988: 394).

> When the merchant stands at the furthest tip of the harbor and watches his ship and its rich cargo in distress and, concentrating his mind on the loss, goes away saying to himself: it is your own fault that you did not insure it—I wonder if he really would be happy if a sailor came running after him and said, "We can see the ship again; it has not gone down!"—and the merchant turned around, the sailor took the telescope to look out there and said, "Why, now it is gone again!" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 329).

A year later the two inadvertently see each other on the street. The diarist observes:

> I have never known a girl or any person in whom the preliminaries to tears and laughter were so much alike as in her. And in this case the contrasts were not even so pronounced, for a stifled laugh is detectable in the movements of the muscles of the neck, and a stifled sob by the expansion of the chest, but here the doubtfulness of the relations lay in lesser contrasts, and then there was no time to look … One could go mad trying to extort something definite out of an impression like that (Kierkegaard, 1988: 335).

Meanwhile, Taciturnus suggests his hero displays a "earnestness" that is also "a jest," which is just the sort of "higher passion" the contemporary culture is apparently unprepared to take up. Put together, the pair alternate: "The tragic girl who dies and the comic sinner who becomes a murderer, the tragic sinner who suffers and the comic girl who goes on living" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 448). With something more than mere poetry, the

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diary as a whole thus presents a "unity of the comic and the tragic" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 440). One way or another, a faithful love truly felt and honestly lived issues in a kind of spiritual dacrygelosis.

This tragicomic tenor brings us to the south pawed moral of the story, to Kierkegaard's religiously romantic, or romantically religious point of view. In a crucial passage from the back half of his letter Taciturnus describes the peculiar position of the diarist as one for whom repentance has become "dialectical." By way of illustration, he offers a version of King David, the presumed author of Psalm 51.

> David has decided that Uriah must be put away in a subtle fashion so that Bathsheba can become his. I am assuming that he has sent a messenger with secret orders to the commander; I am assuming that it takes the messenger three days' journey to reach the camp. The historic actuality makes no difference here. What happens? The very same night the messenger departed, David, trying to find the rest of sleep, does not find it but finds terror wide awake; it grips him, and he collapses in repentance—in the next paragraph, to be sure, comes the atonement. No, wait a minute. That same moment David realizes that it might still be possible to prevent the murder. An express messenger is sent, and David stays behind. I am assuming this takes five days more. Five days—how much is that? After all, it is not a phrase in a paragraph; at most it is a particle, a "meanwhile" that merely begins a sentence, but five days could very well make a man gray-haired (Kierkegaard, 1988: 450–1).

This version of David illustrates how innocence and then guilt and then atonement do not proceed in life as they might in a paragraph. Indeed, all three phenomena fold in on one another in such a way that, along life's way, our sense of moral agency emerges from a temporal distention that includes sin and salvation as ongoing, simultaneous possibilities, paradoxically rendering us both soiled and pure throughout a given series of events. To be sure, the diarist does not share David's initially murderous intent, but in a way, this only makes his position even more dialectical. In any case,

> he cannot begin to repent, because what he ought to repent of seems to be undecided as yet; and he cannot find rest in repentance, because it seems as if he were continually about to act, to undo everything, if that were possible … In the system, a person repents once and for all in ¶17 and then goes onto ¶18. But if healing is to begin for the existing person, the moment must come when one lets the act of repentance go. For one single moment this has a deceptive similarity to forgetfulness. But to forget guilt is a new sin. This is the difficulty (Kierkegaard, 1988: 451–2).

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Much that might seem innocent at the time is not so. Still, we can, should, and even must act. This is a particularly harrowing insight to have about moral agency and what it means to take responsibility. If David's example is at all typical, it implies we may recover before it's too late. And yet, we can never rest assured. Thus, repentance is always appropriate for creatures like ourselves, though not because we are in some specifiable sense guilty. Undoubtedly, at some point, we must also let the act of repentance go – but here again, not because we are in some corresponding sense innocent. In contrast, one who "goes undauntedly through life on the category that he is not a criminal but not faultless, either, is of course comic" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 479). Such comedic ones are precisely those who, in the words of the diarist, "sally forth, unaware of the dangers" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 344). And the genuine danger, what we should fear above all else, is not fate, but guilt (Kierkegaard, 1988: 460).

> Here there are not hard-hearted fathers as with the unhappy lovers in the tragedy; here there is not the superiority of the enemy, before which the hero in the tragic drama falls; here there is not the betrayal by the person one trusted most so that the outstanding person is caught in the trap—here there is only one person who can be the betrayer, oneself, and next to him, but infinitely far removed, the speaker who would advise one to leave it alone instead of doing the only thing he can do—helping one out into the depths where there are 70,000 fathoms. And when this has happened and he now perceives that he can do no more, cannot do more to help the person he loved more than his own life (as is possible in the story of the play) but only in this anxiety discovers that he has 140,000 fathoms beneath him, there is still one thing left to do; he can shout to the beloved, "If you do not become happy now, then know this, know that it is your own fault" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 471).

Suspended with ethical dread, a fully integrated, authentically "religious" individual is nevertheless "always joyful" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 470). Needless to say, "he who truthfully and simultaneously can say he is always in danger and always joyful is saying simultaneously the most disheartening and the most high-minded words spoken" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 470). The mere glimpse of such passion is itself the "presentiment" of "a life-view not given in poetry" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 417–8).

Returning to the particulars of the diary, Taciturnus admits his hero "is something of a self-tormentor" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 472). The diarist recognizes the dangers but remains stuck there and "does not retrieve himself in joy quickly enough to repeat the movement again" (Ibid). But as befits his peculiar romanticism, it "is possible that things will go better for him if he is sufficiently sensible to regard a whole life as compatible

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with such a course of instruction and to reconcile himself to remaining a dawdler among those who are quickly finished, a retarded pupil among those who go infinitely further" (Ibid). As for his beloved, she is certainly helpful in getting the diarist "out upon the deep." She is "lovely enough to stir him, but also weak enough to misuse her power," rather than "more spiritually qualified and less femininely lovable" (Kierkegaard, 1988: 473). She is truly his other half *rather* than one who would have magnanimously said:

> My dear, you distress me with your deceit. I do not understand you, and do not know whether you are irresponsible enough to want to leave me because you want to be out in the world or whether you are hiding something from me and are perhaps better than you seem. But whichever it is, I do realize you must have your freedom; I fear for myself if I were not to give it to you, and I love you too much to deny you it. So take it, without any recriminations, without any anger between us, without any thanks on your part but with the awareness on my part that I have done the best I could (Ibid).

If this was her expressed character, Taciturnus comments, then the diarist "would have been crushed; he would have been sunk into the ground for shame," not before God but before a human being (Kierkegaard, 1988: 473–4). To be sure, some readers have wanted her to deliver these or some such lines just to be through with the whole affair and his idealistic, religiously imbued melancholy. As it is, Taciturnus keeps to an interpersonally dynamic, narrative suspension. She remains a fully agonized participant, which is precisely what allows her to play the humanly divine role she does, minus the magnanimity. The diarist is indeed humbled. In this way, how we are supposed to be brought low in order to romantically rise above ourselves – socially, artistically, even somatically – stands out as transcendently revealing. Meanwhile, the possibility of joy amidst the distress remains decidedly underdetermined and constitutes the high and holy, seductive tension of it all.

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For Quill and Finch

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Cambridge Elements

Philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard

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